

# Teaching Reading in a Second Language

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Effective reading is essential for success in acquiring a second language. After all, reading is the basis of instruction in all aspects of language learning: using textbooks for language courses, writing, revising, developing vocabulary, acquiring grammar, editing, and using computer-assisted language learning programs. Reading instruction, therefore, is an essential component of every second-language curriculum. Understanding some important facts about reading, literacy, and teaching methods is essential for providing effective instruction in reading.

## What is reading?

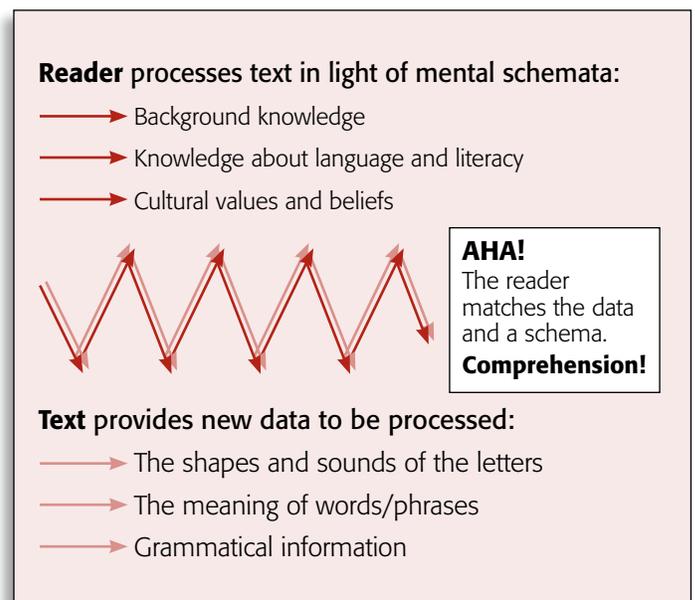
Reading is a conscious and unconscious thinking process. The reader applies many strategies to reconstruct the meaning that the author is assumed to have intended. The reader does this by comparing information in the text to his or her background knowledge and prior experience.

A reader approaches a text with a huge store of prior knowledge and experience, including preconceptions about the uses of spoken and written language. All of a person's prior knowledge, experience, and values are organized in categories, or schemata. Each category, or schema, is connected to many other schemata in a complex mental network. As he or she notices particular ideas or facts in a text, the reader matches that information with background knowledge and is able to construct a version of the text's meaning.

Researchers in text comprehension have applied an information-processing analogy to understanding how people think, learn, and remember what they read. When a person reads, two aspects of this "human information processing system" continuously interact. When the reader focuses primarily on what he or she already knows, this is called a concept-driven or "top-down" mode. On the other hand, when the reader relies primarily on textual features and information to comprehend, this is called a data-driven or "bottom-up" mode (Kintsch and van Dijk 1978; Rumelhart and Ortony 1977; Winograd 1977;

Rumelhart 1980). In other words, the reader is constantly noticing parts of the text and comparing that sample with what he or she already knows.

The diagram below shows how the reader continuously and simultaneously employs both top-down and bottom-up processes while reading.



The diagram shows that the reader (top of diagram) samples the text (bottom of diagram) and instantaneously (and usually unconsciously) compares what he or she notices in the text with what he or she already knows, trying to find a match. The textual information activates prior knowledge, and the prior knowledge, in turn, activates expectations about what is in the text. This primarily unconscious, interactive process continues until the reader is satisfied with the match between text and prior knowledge, and comprehension has occurred. (AHA!)

Readers' first language and mental schemata, however, determine what they notice in a text and how they apply the mental schemata to that information, and second language readers' mental schemata are based on their first language and cultural background. This means that what

second-language readers notice in the text and how they interpret it will vary due to differing expectations about language structure and cultural attitudes toward literacy.

It is important to clarify the relationship between reading and literacy, since research has shown that they are not the same thing. In fact, the definitions and uses of literacy vary culturally, and the cultural contexts of literacy are the underpinnings of the acquisition and use of reading and writing.

### **What is literacy?**

**Literacy is a set of attitudes and beliefs about the ways of using spoken and written language that are acquired in the course of a person's socialization into a specific cultural context.**

Language and culture cannot be separated. Language knowledge and thinking patterns are socially constructed within a cultural setting, and each language/culture fosters its own way of understanding the world. In other words, each culture fosters the development of different schemata of the world. That is why readers from two different cultural backgrounds can read the same text and construct very different models of what the text means. They have different schemata (different background knowledge), different expectations about how a text should present information, and different ways of creating meaning.

Consequently, teachers cannot assume that students who are good readers in their native language can simply apply successfully the same skills to reading in English. Reading in English requires a set of thinking skills and attitudes that grow out of the spoken and written use of the English language. Teaching reading in standard English to second-language learners and other limited English proficient students means helping them acquire the literate behaviors, the ways of thinking about text, that are practiced by native speakers of English. In fact, learning to read and comprehend a second language requires learning a secondary literacy: alternative cultural interpretations, cultural beliefs about language and discourse, and culture-specific formal and content schemata. It is important to realize that learning to read effectively in a second language literally alters the learner's cognitive structures and values orientations.

### **Teaching Reading: Applying Theory and Research to Practice**

We can conclude, therefore, that second-language students need to learn to "think in English" in order to read effectively in English. Reading instruction needs to be based on training ESL and EFL students in new ways of talking

and thinking about texts. In teaching reading, instructors need to take into account the following conclusions and recommendations of educational researchers.

- Cognitive psychologists have shown in their research that students learn new strategies or thinking processes most effectively when they are consciously aware of what they are doing (Brown, Armbruster, and Baker, 1986). Once students are conscious of the processes, they can monitor their comprehension and apply appropriate strategies as needed for comprehending a text (Brown, 1978).
- Interacting and talking about text in particular ways is essential (Casanave 1988). Heath (1984), Vygotsky (1962), and others found that students develop literate skills when teachers encourage them to talk about written language, when teachers model comprehension strategies for them, and when students have opportunities to talk to each other about how they make sense of a text (Hoffman and Heath, 1986).
- Research has also shown that literacy is not a neutral technology, but is, in fact, a cultural artifact laden with the values and beliefs of the culture in which it arises (Street, 1984; Cook-Gumperz, 1986). One's native language literacy (or primary Discourse, as Gee terms it) is acquired from birth by being socialized into the native language and the local culture's ways of using language. Literate behaviors grow out of the spoken and written language practices of a local culture. And according to Gee, serving as an apprentice to a "native" is the way one acquires a new literacy, or secondary Discourse. (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986; Gee, 1996).
- Research also confirms that students must read faster and with more fluency if they wish to read effectively (Eskey, 1986; Anderson, 2005). Faster reading promotes reading in thought units instead of one word at a time, and that leads to improved comprehension.
- Krashen (1985) posited that the best way to improve reading is by reading. In recent years, research and practice have validated that idea (Day and Bamford, 1998). The benefits of extensive reading include fluency, vocabulary acquisition, awareness of grammar, models for writing, and an immersion in the culture of the second or foreign language.
- Finding effective methods of promoting second-language vocabulary acquisition seemed, for many years, to be an impossible goal. Thanks to recent work by Nation (2001), Coxhead (2000), Cobb, and others, word frequency lists are available that will allow

teachers to focus on the words that will be the most useful for their students. Nation's approach combines direct instruction, extensive reading, and multiple exposures to the same words by any means necessary to promote learning.

In order to read well in English, then, students need to do the following:

1. Develop a schema of the reading process that includes the idea that reading is more than translating—reading is thinking.
2. Talk about their reading, and explain how they make sense of a text.
3. Read extensively for pleasure in English, and discuss their reading with someone who can model the literate behaviors expected in an English-language context.
4. Break the habit of reading every word by reading faster.
5. Learn to vary their reading rate to suit their purpose in reading.
6. Employ top-down processes effectively by learning to make connections between what they already know and what they are reading.
7. Learn reading and thinking skills that fluent readers of English employ unconsciously to strengthen both top-down and bottom-up processing abilities.
8. Enhance bottom-up processing by acquiring the most useful vocabulary and by learning strategies for guessing meaning in context.
9. Master the basic 2,000 words that constitute approximately 80 percent of texts in English.
10. Acquire specific reading comprehension skills they can apply strategically.

Putting this all together, it is clear that students will learn to read in English best in a class that includes, on a regular basis, the following components:

- Substantial amounts of extensive reading for pleasure, with opportunities for talking about their books with people who can model the literate skills required in English-language contexts.
- Focused, interactive lessons on specific reading skills, with opportunities for students to explain their thinking, and direct instruction on applying the skills strategically to a variety of texts.
- Training and practice in fluency development (skimming, scanning, previewing) and reading rate improvement.
- Vocabulary activities that include direct instruction in high-frequency words, multiple opportunities for

exposure to and manipulation of the target words, and plenty of extensive reading.

### ***Extensive reading***

Extensive reading is a highly individualized approach to reading improvement. Students select their own books and read at their own pace. The teacher should guide students to select books at a level of comprehension that allows for “comprehensible input” (Krashen). The emphasis is on the quantity of books read and the students’ enjoyment of their books. Students are never tested formally on their extensive reading. However, they are required to talk about the books they read in structured activities, including book conferences with the teacher, brief oral reports to the class, and discussions in small group settings.

Day and Bamford (1998) have documented the benefits of extensive reading, which include:

- Development of a positive attitude toward reading in a second language.
- Motivation to read more.
- Increased reading fluency.
- Gains in vocabulary and grammar knowledge.
- Improvement in writing in the second language.

According to Day and Bamford, extensive reading can be included in a second-language curriculum “as a separate course; as part of an existing reading course; as a non-credit addition to an existing course; and as an extracurricular activity (p. 41, 1998).”

### ***Reading skills***

Reading skills are the cognitive processes that a reader uses in making sense of a text. For fluent readers, most of the reading skills are employed unconsciously and automatically. When confronted with a challenging text, fluent readers apply these skills consciously and strategically in order to comprehend.

Every language requires a different repertoire of reading skills, based on the structure of the language and the literacy habits of the native speakers of that language. ESL and EFL teachers, therefore, should train students in the skills that will give them the power to comprehend in English. As Brown and others pointed out, learning a new thinking process is best accomplished when the learner is consciously aware of the process, and an approach to teaching reading skills should take that into account. In fact, the more students talk about their thinking processes, the more they learn.

Many teachers believe that they can teach reading skills by instructing students to read a text and then showing

them how to apply a variety of skills to the text for better comprehension. It is more effective for students, however, to focus on one reading skill at a time and talk about their application of that skill in a number of text samples. Eventually, students will be able to apply the skill unconsciously so that they can call it up to consciousness and apply it strategically whenever they face a challenging text.

### **Reading skills**

- 1.** Automatic decoding. Being able to recognize a word at a glance.
- 2.** Previewing and predicting. Giving the text a quick once-over to be able to guess what is to come.
- 3.** Specifying purpose. Knowing why a text is being read.
- 4.** Identifying genre. Knowing the nature of the text in order to predict the form and content.
- 5.** Questioning. Asking questions in an inner dialog with the author.
- 6.** Scanning. Looking through a text very rapidly for specific information.
- 7.** Recognizing topics. Finding out what the text is about.
- 8.** Classification of ideas into main topics and details. Categorizing words and ideas on the basis of their relationships; distinguishing general and specific.
- 9.** Locating topic sentences. Identifying the general statement in a paragraph.
- 10.** Stating the main idea (or thesis) of a sentence, paragraph or passage. Knowing what the author's point is about the topic.
- 11.** Recognizing patterns of relationships. Identifying the relationships between ideas; the overall structure of the text.
- 12.** Identifying and using words that signal the patterns of relationships between ideas. Being able to see connections between ideas by the use of words such as first, then, later.
- 13.** Inferring the main idea, using patterns and other clues.
- 14.** Recognizing and using pronouns, referents, and other lexical equivalents as clues to cohesion.
- 15.** Guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context. Using such clues as knowledge of word parts, syntax, and relationship patterns.
- 16.** Skimming. Quickly getting the gist or overview of a passage or book.

- 17.** Paraphrasing. Re-stating texts in the reader's own words in order to monitor one's own comprehension.
- 18.** Summarizing. Shortening material by retaining and re-stating main ideas and leaving out details.
- 19.** Drawing conclusions. Putting together information from parts of the text and inducing new or additional ideas.
- 20.** Drawing inferences and using evidence. Using evidence in the text to know things that are unstated.
- 21.** Visualizing. Picturing, or actually drawing a picture or diagram, of what is described in the text.
- 22.** Reading critically. Judging the accuracy of a passage with respect to what the reader already knows; distinguishing fact from opinion.
- 23.** Reading faster. Reading fast enough to allow the brain to process the input as ideas rather than single words.
- 24.** Adjusting reading rate according to materials and purpose. Being able to choose the speed and strategies needed for the level of comprehension desired by the reader.

(Mikulecky, 1990)

### **An approach to teaching reading skills**

- 1.** Focus on one skill at a time.
- 2.** Explain the purpose of working on this skill, and convince the students of its importance in reading effectively.
- 3.** Work on an example of using the skill with the whole class. Explain your thinking aloud as you do the exercise.
- 4.** Assign students to work in pairs on an exercise where they practice using the same skill. Require them to explain their thinking to each other as they work.
- 5.** Discuss students' answers with the whole class. Ask them to explain how they got their answers. Encourage polite disagreement, and require explanations of any differences in their answers.
- 6.** In the same class, and also in the next few classes, assign individuals to work on more exercises that focus on the same skill with increasing complexity. Instruct students to work in pairs whenever feasible.
- 7.** Ask individual students to complete an exercise using the skill to check their own ability and confidence in using it.
- 8.** In future lessons, lead the students to apply the skill, as well as previously mastered skills, to a variety of texts.

## Reading Fluency

Reading fluency can be defined as reading fast with good comprehension and adjusting the reading rate to suit the purpose for reading. It is important to note that reading fluency does not refer to oral reading, however, because it is possible for someone to read a passage aloud fluently and not comprehend it at all. Fluency in silent reading promotes improved comprehension by allowing the student to read for ideas rather than for individual words.

Studies have indicated that training in reading fluency should constitute about 25 percent of instructional time (Anderson 2005). In addition to improving reading comprehension, fluency will help ESL/EFL students in academic settings who are unable to keep up with their reading assignments, often a cause of failing a course or dropping out of college. Taking too much time in the first reading of an assignment means there is not enough time for reflecting on and reviewing the reading materials. Reading slowly during a test often means not being able to finish it. Fluency training should include:

- Practice with timed reading passages followed by comprehension questions.
- Lessons in such skills as scanning and skimming that help students learn how to move their eyes quickly and purposefully over a text.
- Opportunities for large quantities of extensive reading.

## Vocabulary development

Reading comprehension depends on vocabulary knowledge and vice versa. The more students read, the better their vocabulary becomes. And the more vocabulary they know, the better they can read. The question for teachers and second-language students, however, was always, "Which words should the students learn?"

Thanks to research in corpus linguistics, teachers have a good source for the most important words to teach first. According to Nation, about 2,000 high-frequency words constitute 80 percent of all texts in English. Students who master those 2,000 words, therefore, are well on their way to being able to comprehend texts in English. And for students in academic settings, Coxhead (2000) has published a list of 570 high-frequency words (the Academic Word List), which students should also learn. Students can learn these 2,750 words through a combination of direct instruction and self-study in a relatively short time.

According to Nation (2001), direct teaching of vocabulary should constitute about 25 percent of a vocabulary

program. Instruction should be planned so that the students encounter a new word at least seven or more times in meaningful contexts. To motivate students, it is important to explain the usefulness of mastering the high-frequency words and how that will improve reading comprehension.

In addition to direct instruction, teachers can do a lot to enhance vocabulary building. They can teach students how to:

- Study and learn words effectively.
- Choose new words they want to learn.
- Use a dictionary.
- Keep a vocabulary notebook—with sentences, syllable break-downs, and definitions.
- Make and use word study cards.
- Review their word study cards—alone, with a partner, and in class
- Use Web pages, such as [www.lextutor.ca](http://www.lextutor.ca), to find out more about words and collocation from concordances.

## Conclusion

Extensive reading, comprehension skills, reading fluency, and vocabulary building—these four components clearly overlap, as they should, because they are all an integral part of the development of effective second-language reading.

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