Developing effective reading strategies in the ESOL classroom

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Abstract

This article discusses the significance of helping students to develop effective reading strategies in the ESOL classroom. It analyses the reading skills that students need to master in order to develop competence in reading and the issues involved in enabling them to do so. It also illustrates how these skills can be developed by means of a series of teaching activities.

Introduction

This article explores how ESOL students can be assisted with reading. In my experience some students are discouraged by reading; they tend to assume that the text 'is bound to be too difficult, and they predict that the whole experience will be frustrating and de-motivating' (Harmer 2001: 208). This is compounded by the fact that they usually employ the wrong strategies when seeking to make sense of the text and hence it is very difficult for them to achieve a detailed understanding of it.

I agree with Nuttall's (1996: 149) idea that reading 'For many students…is the most vital skill, and the one that provides the most spin-off for general language learning'. Hence, I believe that proper provision needs to be made for its development in the classroom. Nunan (1991: 69) proposes a similar idea when he claims that 'With strengthened reading skills, learners will make greater progress and development in all other areas of learning'. When students learn to read the L2, they learn how to transfer the reading skills they acquired in their L1 to the target language. The teacher's role is that of helping students to use the right strategies for them to become efficient readers and hence achieve a detailed understanding of the text.

Issues in reading

According to Smith (1985: 86), 'Comprehension is not a quantity, it is a state – a state of not having any unanswered questions' about a particular text. Given that some students find it particularly challenging to reach this state of 'zero uncertainty' (Smith 1985: 86), it is worthwhile addressing some aspects of reading and their corresponding issues.

Reading processes

When readers engage in bottom-up processing, they need to be able to recognize a large number of words and structures employed in the text in order for them to be able to comprehend the text in detail. The main shortcoming of bottom-up processing is the notion that meaning resides in the text. On the other hand, top-down processing is based on 'the idea that comprehension resides in the reader' (Nunan 1991: 71). When readers adopt this approach, they understand a text by making predictions about its meaning based on their own schemata. The interactive model combines the two approaches; it shows that 'readers process texts by utilizing information provided simultaneously from several different sources, and that they can compensate for deficiencies at one level by drawing on knowledge at other (either higher or lower) levels' (Anderson 2003: 67). Grellet (1981: 6) suggests that 'one should start with global understanding and move towards detailed understanding rather than the other way round'. Nuttall (1996: 151) agrees and claims that readers 'should begin by using a top-down approach and later switch between the two approaches, as each kind of interpretation supports the other according to the needs of the moment'. When students learn to read in this manner they develop the confidence to read more efficiently and are not daunted by authentic texts.

When students do not combine the two kinds of processing they fail to read efficiently, given that deficiencies in any one of the two will impede detailed understanding: 'Efficient readers employ both types, moving from one to the other as they read' (Aebersold & Field 1997: 98). Certain students tend to rely on bottom-up processing when reading a text and they labour over the meaning of the fundamental building blocks of language in order to arrive at understanding, most usually failing to do so because extracting meaning from a text is not just a question of decoding the signs. They must also be able to engage in top-down processing in order to identify what kind of text it is and what topic it deals with. Harmer (2001: 201) points out that 'Without a good understanding of a reasonable proportion of the details gained through some bottom-up processing we will be unable to get any clear general picture of what the text is about'. Similarly, the skill of recognizing the genre 'we are dealing with allows us to predict the form it may take at the text, paragraph, and sentence level' (Harmer 2001: 200). When students fail to capitalize on both modes of processing they find it much harder to achieve detailed understanding.

Readers' schemata

Comprehension of a text depends on a reader's ability to activate their schemata, which is a form of top-down knowledge. Anderson and Lynch (1988) define schemata as mental structures consisting of relevant individual knowledge, memory and experience, which allow us to incorporate what we learn into what we know. According to Nunan (1991: 68), 'The reader's background knowledge integrates with the text to create the meaning'. Thus the first step towards detailed

understanding is usually that of activating readers' schemata. However, sometimes L2 learners 'have to work doubly hard to understand' (Harmer 2001: 200) because they lack the kind of pre-existing knowledge that would allow them to make sense of the text.

In order for students to understand a text they also rely on interest and motivation, which are considered part of schema theory too. Thus if students are not encouraged to read texts that appeal to their personal interests, their understanding is not really enhanced. Some course books contain texts that fail to interest students, sometimes because they are too Euro-centric. In addition, 'The way we interpret depends on the schemata activated by the text; and whether we interpret successfully depends on whether our schemata are sufficiently similar to the writer's' (Nuttall 1996: 7). Hence, if students 'rely too heavily on their knowledge and ignore the limitations imposed by the text' (Aslanian 1985: 20) they will have a problem with comprehending the text's meaning. Given that 'Incorrect background can hinder comprehension' (Nunan 1991: 74), students need to build the right background knowledge first.

Prediction

Prediction is perhaps one of the most fundamental reading sub-skills given that 'the basis of comprehension is prediction and prediction is achieved by making use of what we already know about the world' (Smith 1985: 87). Before reading a text, readers predict what it is about and while reading it they anticipate what is going to happen next based on what has already taken place. Nuttall (1996: 13) affirms that prediction 'calls into mind any experiences and associated knowledge that we already have about the topic of the text' and these activated schemata allow readers to learn more efficiently because they can be modified by what is encountered in the text. In making predictions, readers are tapping their background knowledge and thus reading comprehension is enhanced (Nunan 1991: 74).

When students do not predict a text's content before reading it, they are usually unable to achieve a good level of comprehension. This is probably because encouraging students to 'anticipate what they are to find in the text…is essential in order to develop their skills of inference, anticipation and deduction' (Grellet 1981: 7). While reading a text, students should be able to form a hypothesis that is proven or modified by what they read. However, some inexperienced readers may seek to persevere with their original hypothesis or assume that the text will share their views (Nuttall 1996: 152) and this obviously impinges on the success of comprehension.

Selection

Depending on the reader's purpose for reading, the skill of selecting only what is relevant to one's purpose is highly significant since it allows the reader to understand the text more quickly. A text is usually made up of redundant information and the efficient reader knows how to exploit this redundancy in order to achieve detailed understanding at a faster pace. Hence, the 'the first thing for the student to do is to decide exactly what he wants to get out of his reading' (Nuttall 1996: 44). I have found that by means of a clear purpose, students read in a much more efficient manner.

Certain students feel demotivated when they lack a purpose for reading because they cannot decide what is essential in the text for them to understand it. Knowing what information to look for and where to find it makes the reading experience much more effective, especially if 'a text is used in class in ways that are reasonably similar to real life' (Scrivener 2011: 266). When students are force-fed texts by a teacher they are unable to understand why they need to read the text and hence they run the risk of feeling overwhelmed by all its information.

Inference

Inference is the ability to read between the lines. Readers can use this skill in order 'to reconstruct the writer's unstated presuppositions' or 'to draw certain unstated conclusions from facts, points in an argument …' (Nuttall 1996: 114). It is a very important skill for L2 learners because they might lack some of the schemata assumed by the writer and hence will need to use inference in order to comprehend the text.

I generally find that inference is quite challenging for most students to practise and they are usually reluctant to engage in it, especially when it involves understanding implied meanings in the text. They sometimes assume that all requested information will be found in a straightforward manner and when some information needs to be inferred from the text students easily give up and think that it is absent.

Effective teaching activities

These are five activities that I have found to be particularly effective when trying to help students master the skills involved in reading.

Combining reading processes
adapted from Clanfield & Robb Benne 2011: 90–91

Aim: To enable students to combine top-down and bottom-up processes.

Procedure: In pairs students discuss the picture accompanying the text. Then they read the text in order to answer a gist question. They compare answers in pairs and then match two columns of words in order to make collocations from the text. Next students read the text again in order to answer a series of comprehension questions. This is followed by a vocabulary exercise in which students have to understand what a number of expressions mean according to how they are used in the text.

Commentary: By discussing the picture students are predicting the content of the text and thus utilising their top-down processing skills. The gist question helps them read the text selectively and allows them to combine the two reading processes. The matching and vocabulary exercises expect students to switch to bottom-up processing skills since they have to focus on the lexical level in order to understand how the text is employing certain collocations and expressions. The

comprehension questions require students to read the text in greater detail and employ both modes of processing for a thorough understanding.

Activating schemata
adapted from Oxenden & Latham-Koenig 1999: 38

Aim: To introduce the topic of the text by activating students' schemata.

Procedure: In pairs students discuss three questions about their experience of family holidays. After they do this for about five minutes, students are asked to share some of their experiences with the rest of the class. Then they discuss the picture accompanying the text and the kind of tourist attraction it is describing. After they do this students are ready to start reading the text.

Commentary: By being asked to discuss questions about their own experience of family holidays, students are being primed for an efficient reading of the text. The activated schemata are the ones in relation to where people go on holiday and what they talk about when they discuss holidays. These schemata will probably allow students to relate to the text better once they actually read it. Combining general questions with a picture that specifically describes an event in the text helps students to use the right kind of background knowledge for a fuller understanding of the text.

Making predictions
adapted from Cunningham & Moor 2005: 62–63

Aim: To encourage students to predict text content by means of headlines.

Procedure: After discussing the newspapers and magazines they usually read and the topics that commonly feature in news stories, in pairs, students read a series of headlines and try to predict what the corresponding article is about without looking at it. Then students are given a list of words taken from the articles and in pairs they need to guess which headline each one of the words relates to. Students are given a few minutes to read the articles and match them to the headlines, discussing their answers with their partner.

Commentary: The initial discussion helps to introduce the topic and activate the students' schemata. This enables students to be more successful in their prediction of the texts' content and thus it facilitates comprehension. By engaging in the prediction activities in pairs, students help shape a relevant hypothesis that is then confirmed or modified by their reading of the text. The pair discussion minimizes the tendency to adhere to a hypothesis that is not shared by the text.

Selecting information
adapted from Kay & Jones 2000: 47

Aim: To enable students to read for specific information.

Procedure: Students are provided with a text focusing on a famous person's greatest wish. After making a number of predictions about the text by means of a picture, students are asked to read the text quickly looking for the famous person's greatest wish. A time limit is imposed. Students do the task individually and then compare answers in pairs, explaining to one another where they found the required information.

Commentary: The picture and title help to guide students with their selection task by making them predict what the text is about. Asking them to find information in a specified period of time encourages them to read the text in a selective manner and provides them with a purpose for reading. The students focus on that part of the narrative that concerns the greatest wish and skim through the redundant information leading up to it. By means of pair work students manage to confirm their answer and thus consolidate understanding.

Practising inference
adapted from Forsyth 2000: 81

Aim: To help students practise inference skills.

Procedure: Students are asked to read three short poems and in pairs to discuss the sort of people who wrote them. Then they are given a list of adjectives and to use them in order to describe what the writers are probably like.

Commentary: By describing what they think each poet is like, students are making inferences about people they do not know on the basis of what they have read. By doing the task in pairs students can engage in peer support, which is highly necessary given the challenging nature of inference skills. In this manner students' reluctance to engage in inference is overcome.

Conclusion

In this article I have explored those skills and issues that are particularly relevant to a discussion on how students can be helped to develop effective reading strategies in the ESOL classroom. Enabling students to master such strategies will allow them to reach a state of zero uncertainty and build the confidence to read autonomously.

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