

DEVELOPING READING EFFICIENCY AT THE INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

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Abstract. The article deals with developing students' reading skills at the intermediate level. It concentrates on the processes that take place while reading, analyses various reading techniques and methods of assessing students' comprehension, and points at the most common problems that students encounter while interacting with a written material. The three key stages of an effective reading lesson have also been briefly characterised.

Keywords: reading, efficiency, skills, comprehension, teacher, students, text

SPRAWNOŚCI EFEKTYWNEGO CZYTANIA ZE ZROZUMIENIEM NA POZIOMIE ŚREDNIO ZAAWANSOWANYM

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Abstrakt. Artykuł jest poświęcony rozwijaniu sprawności czytania ze zrozumieniem na poziomie średnio zaawansowanym. Analizuje on procesy i najczęściej występujące problemy zachodzące podczas czytania oraz omawia różne techniki rozwoju sprawności czytania i sprawdzania jego zrozumienia. Artykuł również krótko charakteryzuje trzy kluczowe etapy efektywnych zajęć z czytania.

Słowa kluczowe: czytanie, efektywność, umiejętności, zrozumienie, nauczyciel, studenci/uczniowie, tekst

Reading is an extremely useful skill necessary in daily life as one reads much every day. Therefore, it is important to work on it and develop students' reading efficiency which will help them undertake reading-related tasks in the future. Competence in reading includes flexibility in speed and comprehension, so successful readers are not only able to read slowly with a good comprehension but they can also read quickly with necessary understanding when the circumstances arise. This is not simple, more so as reading involves not only looking at the words and understanding their literal meaning but also making sense of the information that is implicitly stated in a text. That is why an effective lesson on reading should be well-prepared and contain a variety of activities which will enable students to practise different reading skills and help them become more competent readers.

It is important to remember that the effectiveness of a lesson on reading depends on the choice of the appropriate reading material. Several factors should be taken into consideration when selecting it: students' interest because of its relations to motivation, their reading abilities, authenticity of the language and the exploitation of the passage. Since it is difficult to

predict what students will need to read in the future, it is advisable to expose them to a variety of texts. Such an approach will undoubtedly contribute to the development of students' reading competence and will make lessons motivating and more interesting.

Teachers who want their students to become efficient readers should bear in mind that reading is a silent activity, therefore, reading aloud in the classroom should be avoided. It is unnatural and stressful and it has nothing to do with developing reading competence. It not only prevents learners from comprehending the text effectively as students focus their attention on pronunciation, not on the content, but it also makes the process of reading slower and gives the impression that all texts are to be read at the same speed. It is silent reading that should be encouraged, as it will help students develop efficient reading skills useful in real life and will prepare learners for reading English in the future (Doff 1996: 58-59).

As there is no efficient reading without understanding, teachers should not forget about developing learners' basic comprehension skills, which are brought in every time one reads something. One of them is plain sense reading – the ability to read the lines and understand the plain sense of what is stated in the text. In other words, plain sense reading deals with recognising the information which is explicitly presented in the reading material. Another comprehension skill, deductive reading, is connected with reading between the lines, when the reader must go beyond the explicit information to make sense of what is implied in the text. This skill deals with drawing inferences, as well as with understanding silences in the text and paying attention not only to what is said but also to what is left unsaid. The third type of comprehension skills is projective reading, associated with relating the reading passage to real life, one's opinions and experience. Working on developing this skill will involve students in a personal response to the text, which is a part of reading in real life. As Penny Ur stressed, "reading activities should therefore see the understanding of a text only as a preliminary step on the way to further learning or other personal purposes" (1996: 150-151).

When working on the development of students' reading competence, the teachers should bear in mind that efficient readers have certain expectations of what they are going to read. They spontaneously make predictions as to what message they expect to find and, as they progress into the material, they confirm or revise their hypotheses. Furthermore, using the evidence of what has preceded, they predict the continuation of the text. The ability to make predictions reduces their reliance on visual information, increases their reading speed and enhances comprehension. As Jeremy Harmer stated, "the process of understanding the text is the process of seeing how the content of the text matches up to these predictions" (1996: 183). Therefore, it is important to arouse students' expectations before reading. Learners can be encouraged to make predictions on the basis of the title, subtitle, pictures, or key-words. This will help them form a mental picture of what they are going to study before they are exposed to the actual text and will make

their reading more involving and motivating because of the challenge of discovering whether their predictions have been right or wrong.

If the reading process is to be efficient, students must be given a reason to read. Thus reading in the classroom will resemble a real life activity when the interaction with a text is inseparably connected with a certain purpose, with something that one needs to find out or check. It is the reading purpose that determines the way one reads a text. Teachers can make reading in the classroom purposeful by asking questions and by setting the appropriate task of a linguistic or non-linguistic nature. Reading activities should be meaningful, flexible, and student-centred, and they ought to be assigned before students begin to read. Thus learners will know what to avail from the text and which reading skill to apply. They will be able to concentrate better on the meaning, think about the text and organise the information in their minds. Reading purpose will definitely increase their involvement in the passage and their motivation, which is an important factor leading to a successful interaction with the text (Doff 1996: 170; Harmer 1996: 182).

Questions and tasks not only give students purpose but they also provide the teachers with a good opportunity to evaluate learners' comprehension. If one wants the lesson on reading to lead to the development of students' reading efficiency, it is necessary to check how well the learners have understood the text. A good way to do this is through comprehension questions or true/false statements. They are useful as they not only check students' comprehension but they also develop it. Students are required to recognise the information that is explicitly stated in the text as well as to read between the lines and think about the passage. When learners read the material for the first time, it is advisable to give them some straightforward guiding questions which will focus students' attention only on the most important parts of the text and will check whether students have understood what is central to the whole text. Then they can exploit the text further by performing the activities which require more detailed comprehension. Such an approach, involving moving from global to more detailed understanding, gives learners extra reading from the same amount of text and enables them to exploit the material more completely. It is also an efficient way to build up students' confidence in reading and develop the awareness of the way the text is organised (Doff 1996: 61-63).

According to Françoise Grellet, "understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible" (1998: 3). This is connected with the fact that "there is not one type of reading but several according to one's reasons for writing" (Grellet 1998: 10). By reading all texts in the same way learners would fail to remember the essential points because they would absorb too much unimportant information. Therefore, it is valid to develop students' different reading skills which will enable them to deal with various types of texts effectively.

There are two useful reading skills which should be practised: skimming and scanning. Skimming, also known as reading for gist, deals with

going through the reading material quickly in order to grasp a general picture of it, to find out how the text is organised or, as Grellet claimed, "get an idea of the tone or the intention of the writer" (1998: 19). Students need to be able to skim a text as it is a common form of reading in real life to satisfy curiosity or, as Sandra Silberstein pointed out, to "determine if a more careful reading is warranted" (1994: 11). When scanning, on the other hand, readers do not read the whole text but extract specific items of information, such as a date, a figure, or a name. This reading technique which requires learners to read quickly and selectively is also an example of a skill that students will need in real situations, when looking something up in a dictionary or finding out travel times, etc.¹

When dealing with an English text, students often want to have a word by word translated version of it. Consequently, they pay attention to every lexical item that they are not familiar with. Thus they fail to recognise the general meaning of the text and have problems with extracting specific information. Therefore, as Adrian Doff emphasised, teachers should convince them that "it is possible to understand a text without understanding every single word" (1996: 60), and that the ability to do this leads to successful reading in real life. Instead of providing learners with the meaning of every unknown word, it is more advisable to pre-teach them only the key vocabulary which is necessary for comprehending the passage. Such an approach will contribute to building up students' confidence by demonstrating that they can comprehend much from the text without understanding everything. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to cope with unfamiliar items by guessing at the meaning from the context, rather than by looking them up in a dictionary. Thus learners will develop the important skill of inference which will enable them to read English texts successfully in real life situations in the future (Doff 1996: 60).

As texts are static, students are often tempted to read them slowly. Thus they get discouraged easily and, as Grellet noted, "stumble on unfamiliar words and fail to grasp the general meaning of the passage" (1998: 16). Therefore, the teacher should ask learners to time themselves by insisting on the comprehension activities being performed in a limited amount of time. This will help learners identify words quickly and, consequently, comprehend the text more effectively. Such an approach will also enable them to concentrate better, utilise previous knowledge more efficiently, and depend less on the printed text. A good way of making students read faster is through skimming and scanning when learners have the possibility to adapt their reading speed and technique to their aim, thus developing their reading competence.

¹ Jeremy Harmer distinguished between type 1 and type 2 skills. Type 1 skills are those that students practise when they read the text for the first time, for example to extract specific information or to get the general picture of the text. Type 2 skills, on the other hand, are used for a more detailed analysis of the text (1996: 188-189).

Students should also be made aware of how texts are constructed. They must be able to recognise logical connectors, such as conjunctions and adverbs placed between sentences and clauses, and reference devices, which are expressions referring to words in the following or previous sentences. Thus students will be prevented from misunderstanding the text and losing the thread of what they are reading. By understanding cohesive devices learners will interpret the text efficiently and they will recognise the communicative value of it (Harmer 1996: 208-209).

An effective lesson on reading should consist of three methodological stages: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. They play an important part in the development of students' reading efficiency as they enable learners to activate their existing schematic knowledge to reach a satisfactory interpretation of the text. Various kinds of text-related tasks performed during these stages facilitate students' interaction with a text and provide orientation to the context and content.

The pre-reading stage is especially important as it prepares students for the actual reading and makes it more efficient. During this phase teachers introduce the topic by giving background information, or by activating students' prior knowledge which is necessary for the comprehension of the text. Pre-reading activities raise learners' interest and motivation as well as create expectations about the content of the text so that students can understand better what is going to happen. It is also during this stage that the teacher pre-teaches the key vocabulary and gives students a reason for reading (Doff 1996: 59-60).

During the while-reading phase learners are involved in reading the text and performing the activity that has been set beforehand. They read in a way which is perceived to be appropriate for the type of the text. The main goals of this stage are skill practice, linguistic development as well as helping learners understand the writer's purpose, the structure and content of the text (Harmer 2012: 125-126).

The post-reading stage should not be neglected either as it helps learners consolidate what they have read and aims to relate the text to students' experience, knowledge, and opinions. In order to achieve these objectives it is necessary to integrate reading with other language skills, especially speaking and writing. Obviously, one should encourage learners to use what they have read to perform some task. It will make the lessons on reading more effective as they will resemble activities from everyday situations when one skill cannot be performed without another (Harmer 2012: 127).

Teaching reading is not an easy task due to the complex nature of the reading process. It should be remembered that competent readers employ different subskills, such as predicting, skimming, scanning, guessing at unknown items or recognising discourse markers, according to their reading purpose. Therefore, it is necessary to work on the development of these skills, especially with intermediate-level students, who are already familiar with basic grammatical structures and vocabulary. Furthermore, teachers' role is to act as mediators between the passage and its readers, and to

encourage students to participate in various types of reading activities. This will undoubtedly contribute to the development of learners' reading efficiency and prepare them for functioning successfully in real life reading situations.

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