

MOVING TOWARDS HIGHER-ORDER READING SKILLS

Данная статья посвящена одному из самых важных аспектов обучения практическому английскому языку - аналитическому чтению и рассматривает процесс развития восприятия и понимания прочитанного текста. Авторы статьи, считая процесс чтения текста творческим, предлагают эффективные пути, чтобы практически помочь студентам факультетов иностранных языков применять специально разработанную последовательность работы над текстом и 10 методологических стратегий для достижения его целостного понимания на более высоком уровне.

Reading comprehension is defined as the level of understanding of a writing. Proficient reading depends on the ability to recognize words quickly and effortlessly. If word recognition is difficult, students use too much of their processing capacity to read individual words which interferes with their ability to comprehend what is read to teach comprehension. Much work has been done in the area of teaching novice readers a bank of "reading strategies," or tools to interpret and analyze text. There is not a definitive set of strategies, but common ones include summarizing what you have read, monitoring your reading to make sure it is still making sense, and analyzing the structure of the text. Some programs teach students how to self monitor whether they are understanding and provide students with tools for fixing comprehension problems. Instruction in comprehension strategy use often involves the gradual release of responsibility, wherein teachers initially explain and model strategies. Over time, they give students more and more responsibility for using the strategies until they can use them independently. This technique is generally associated with the idea of [self-regulation](#) and reflects [social cognitive theory](#).

The topic for this article is reading, and specifically, developing reading comprehension skills to a further stage. For a long time we have pioneered many different ways of enabling students to successfully cope with the problems they come across while reading. What we are going to present here today is the result of these several attempts. We do not intend, however, to present an entirely new view about reading comprehension; we consider reading, and have always done so, as a process by means of which a person transfers the meaning of a piece of written discourse to his / her mind and in doing so he / she is able to apprehend, evaluate and appraise it. Having accomplished this, he / she will be able to put this process at his / her service. In other words, he / she is later able to use it in the fulfilment of a specific purpose. We have worked for a long time trying to discover efficient ways to help students go beyond the mere reading comprehension ability and now we are at a turning point where we think that a specific sequence composing presentation and practice of different strategies, phase work, academic activities and intellectual processes is an effective way of reaching the desired goal.

Reading, thus, is understood as a process by which the reader establishes an interactive dialogue with the text. Since there is no explicit response on the part of the text, it is the reader through the use of the appropriate strategies and the efficient implementation of specific activities, the one that has to discover not only the implicit messages from the text but also demonstrate to him / herself the efficiency of his / her comprehension.

As we are all familiar with the way of approaching a reading task, we are not going to discuss the strategies that have traditionally been used to develop this ability. We will only mention the order in which we present and practice them. We will rather concentrate on the higher-order processes, which is what we consider an innovation to the process.

When people at an elementary level first start reading in a foreign language, the only problem they think they have is to understand words. They find a lot of unknown vocabulary and they attach the problem of not understanding the message only to the lack of enough known words. They do not take into account that they have quite a lot "active" vocabulary, and at the same time they ignore their capacity to react to the "passive" or "receptive" one. Therefore, our first step in the process is to analyse, discuss and put into practice strategies at word level: form of words, function of words within a sentence, cognates – true and false, the use of context clues, and the correct use of the dictionary. All of these strategies are, of course, dealt within authentic texts. If the group of students has a common background, this task is much easier because students will have a rather similar knowledge of the topic; but since most of the time we get mixed groups, we choose common knowledge, or general interest topics so that everybody has a similar background.

We continue our work at sentence level and in this stage we emphasise noun groups, both simple

and complex - not only pre but also post modification - correct sentence structure and the components of an idea. At this stage it is necessary to work with tenses, form as well as meaning, but the important result is to be able to detect the real message transmitted through the communicative value of the different tenses.

After that, we start to work at paragraph level and analyse and discuss explicit and implicit cohesive elements. In this stage we not only work with connectors of ideas and reference words, but also with elliptical elements which can pose comprehension / interpreting problems. At this level we also include propositional analysis, emphasising its implications for comprehension and we start working with presuppositions, inferences and true value of ideas. We analyse whole texts with respect to their macro and rhetorical structure, as well as their function.

Finally, in dealing with whole texts, we not only work with strategies commonly used when approaching the task in an authentic way: predicting, skimming, scanning and non-verbal information; we also include an element of comprehension which is taken for granted: the communicative meaning of punctuation marks. Up to this point, this is more or less what we have traditionally called the development of reading comprehension. However, what we think is innovative is the additional work we do related to the further development of the ability. We do not claim this as something we have discovered; it is just the result of a constant search in the field, and the implementation of several attempts through a trial and error procedure. Our final aim is to make students realize that there are some other activities, commonly performed in real academic life, that help them apprehend the whole meaning of any text.

First, we discuss and analyse with them an area commonly forgotten, probably because it is so evident for an efficient reader that nobody pays attention to that: the different phases of the reading activity. This idea was taken from Victor Miguel Niño, a Colombian scholar who has done extensive research in the field. According to him there are 10 steps, or methodological strategies to follow when reading any piece of discourse:

1. Anticipating: a previewing of the text and a series of questions about the type of text and its topic.
2. Reading several times: it depends both on the type of text and on the reader's purpose.
3. Underlining: according to the purpose, words, phrases, main ideas, specific information, etc.
4. Consulting: depending on the specific needs, it is necessary to look for the specific meaning of terms and concepts, get some information about the author, etc.
5. Detecting: identifying the macrostructure of the text and the author's real purpose (intention). It is necessary to distinguish between informative and functional paragraphs, and pay attention to certain signals or expressions (connectors, punctuation, non verbal information).
6. Appreciating: according to the type of the text, value the text itself, its linguistic and stylistic resources.
7. Dialoguing: both with the author and oneself through an active process. It gives way to questions such as "what does this mean?", "what is this?", "what comes next?" etc.
8. Summarising: based on the previous steps and with the corresponding reading notes, it is necessary to draw up the global plan. It should reflect the text's macrostructure. Giving opinions: all through the process, an efficient reader should evaluate and appraise the text in order to answer questions as "is this true?", "is this valid?", "what philosophic / literary / value does it have?" etc.
9. Evaluating: by putting into practice specific techniques to provide some indicators of achievement.

The previous work is carried out by putting into conscious practice activities that are peculiar to academic work. Traditionally most of them have been considered as part of oral or written productive activities-in other words, not directly related to the comprehension task since the students use them to demonstrate their reading comprehension ability. However, in an academic setting, they take the same importance as those mentioned in the first part. These are:

1. Drawing up the macrostructure of the text.
2. Drawing up the rhetorical structure of the text.
3. Note-taking.
4. Summarising.
5. Giving opinions.

When approaching the meaningful content of a text it is necessary, first of all, to understand the relative value of the different ideas within the contextual framework. Therefore, it is essential to distinguish among the different levels of generality and to be able to evaluate the relative importance of

each of them. By doing that the reader starts apprehending the real message the author wants to transmit. This is what working with the macrostructure of a text means. Then, it is necessary to understand the rhetorical purpose not only of the whole text but also of the different paragraphs / sections that form it. In this stage it is necessary to work with three different layers of meaning: the propositional one, related to independent functions; the contextual, which refers to text-dependent functions; and the pragmatic meaning, which is understood as interaction-dependent functions. A correct interpretation of the different rhetorical purposes will provide a deeper understanding of the implicit meanings conveyed by any piece of discourse. This complex task implies an analysis of the message starting with the explicit elements - those stated by the form of the sentence or the words included in it, then going to the text itself and the implicit relations between the sentences of the text, and finally to the relationship implied between the writer and the reader. In other words, what final message wants the writer to transmit to the reader through the text.

The previous activities are usually done based on an academic activity usually performed by any university student regardless of the level – undergraduate or graduate. Any person that wants to profit from a reading activity usually takes notes to remember some of the ideas read. There are, however, different note-taking techniques that facilitate the process of apprehending the message contained in any piece of discourse. These go from underlining important elements in the text, to commenting – glossing – ideas. Though most readers, consciously or unconsciously, perform this activity, making them aware of the different purposes and benefits related to the different techniques enables them to reflect on their level of understanding of the structure and final message of the text. If a person has followed a correct note-taking process, paying attention to the macrostructure and the rhetorical purposes implicit in the text, the next logical step in the reading process is to develop a correct summary. This will tell the reader how well he / she understood it. A correct summary will “demand full understanding of the text, including the ability to distinguish between main points and examples, to perceive the relationships between the various parts of the argument, and so on.”

Again, based on the previous step, the reader can begin to give his / her personal opinions both about the content and the organisation of the text, thus starting to comment it. At this point analysis acquires a very important role. Students are asked to analyse the type of text and its context and tone. Also, it is essential to make the analysis of its implicit meanings as well as its strengths and weaknesses. At this stage, what is important is not only to express personal opinions but also to support them. It is the expression of the conclusions reached after appraising the text and the message transmitted.

As we can see, this is a chain process that goes from simple tasks to more complex ones. Up to this point, the efficient reader has completed two steps that reflect higher-order thought processes: first, synthesising the content of the text, and then analysing both content and message. However, the reading process cannot stop at this point; it is necessary to go on to the final stage – interpreting the text. What does it mean? Understanding the text as a whole. “This includes recognising its relationships with external facts and with the knowledge, views, etc. in the reader’s mind.” The process to follow at this point is to evaluate:

- 1) the contribution the text has made to expected theories, points of view, etc
- 2) the reader’s reactions to that position,
- 3) the logical final step, to what extent can the reader use that information.

In other words evaluating, appreciating and applying the message extracted from the piece of discourse. What we mean, in short, by reading, is to be able to put into effect the micro strategies that will naturally lead to the higher-order processes of synthesising, summarising, analysing and interpreting texts.

There are specific comprehension strategies that some teachers are now using in the classroom. First, teach students about prior knowledge. Prior knowledge is using what you already know to help understand something new." To help students comprehend and learn from a specific reading material, they can access their prior knowledge on a subject to help them relate to the subject that they are learning at the moment.

Making a connection is a when a student can relate a passage to an experience, another book, or other facts about the world. Making connections will help students understand what the author's purpose is and what the story is about. You can use connections with any fiction or non-fiction text that you read.

Questioning is another strategy that will greatly benefit a student. All our knowledge results from questions, which is another way of saying that question-asking is our most important intellectual tool. There are several types of questions that a teacher should focus on: remembering; testing understanding; application or solving; invite synthesis or creating; and evaluation and judging. Teachers should model

these types of questions through "think-aloud" before, during, and after reading a text.

Visualization is when a student can create a picture or movie in their mind while reading text. Using terms like "mental image" and asking sensory questions will help students become better visualizers. Another way of looking at visualization, is to think about bringing words to life.

Inferring is difficult for students. For the younger students, one suggestion is to have the class become book detectives. Explain that detectives use what they already know along with using clues from the book to help "solve" the mystery.

Summarizing is a comprehension strategy that also needs to be taught. Summarizing is telling what is important about the text. A summary might include the answers to who, what, where, when, why, and how. You can have students summarize any text that you are using in the classroom.

Evaluation is about making judgments on what you read and then explaining why you made those judgments. Some activities to help with evaluating can be as easy as having a small group book talk or having students rate a book. Evaluating non-fiction texts can be done by using a criteria checklist (i.e. table of contents, index, titles, headings, etc.) to help students rate a text.

Synthesizing is putting the pieces together to see them in a new way. Students will take what they already know about a subject along with their reflections from the book to create their own interpretation and ideas about a certain text.

Putting all of these "tools" together will give students a toolbox of strategies to help them with reading comprehension.

It is necessary to note that comprehension strategy instruction is difficult for many teachers, particularly because they were not taught this way and because it is a very cognitively demanding task. It is also suggested that professional development can increase teachers' willingness to use reading strategies but admitted that much remains to be done in this area.

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Bibliography

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