TRAINING READING SKILLS IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A COMMUNICATIVE, INTEGRATED SKILLS APPROACH

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Abstract:
The present paper examines a number of effective techniques aimed at building fluent reading skills in the foreign language in a communicative class context. With particular reference to students of English, but applicable to any foreign language reading course, we analyse the psycholinguistic processes involved in reading in a second language, as well as the principles underlying the student pedagogy best suited to the training of reading skills. Proposing an integrated skills approach to reading, we provide an overview of communicative classroom techniques and tasks which reflect the purposeful, task-based, interactive nature of real life reading and approximate to cognitive reality, to the cognitive experience which a fluent reader inherently brings to and derives out of a text.
Keywords:
Reading skills, strategies, comprehension, tasks, communicative, integrated skills.

Reading is a receptive skill which, like listening, presupposes language comprehension rather than production. Understanding the **content of a written text** means interpreting each of its constitutive components: **information** (integrating the old with the new), **structure** (comprehending sentence/text grammar), **lexis** (recognising letters/words, guessing meaning) **text organisation** (interpreting the use of paragraphing and linking devices for text cohesion and coherence) and **context** (assigning the text to a text type).

These are the implicit reader operations/tasks underlying text comprehension, which means that a fluent reader interacts with the text at several levels, contributing meaning to the text on the basis of previous experience. Therefore classroom procedures and tasks should reflect the

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purposeful, task-based, interactive nature of real life reading and exercise types should, as far as possible, approximate to cognitive reality. This refers to the cognitive experience which the reader inherently brings to a text. The aspects of previous experience involved in efficient reading are the following:

a) Knowledge of the language

For classroom reading, this pre-requisite is provided by the suitability of the text to the students' level of language. Both very easy and very difficult texts can raise problems, as the challenge will be too low or two high. A text should provide a fair amount of challenge without being forbidding. That is why the reading programme should closely parallel the students' linguistic competence, since growth in language ability is an essential part of the development of the reading skill.

b) Interest and/or motivation

We normally read for two main reasons (or a combination of both) – information and pleasure. Whatever the reason, we read because we are interested in a certain topic or have a certain motivation, related to study/professional/personal purposes – passing an exam, writing an essay/study/thesis, gaining personal or professional knowledge, pursuing a hobby or a pleasant pastime. In the classroom, this can be realised by selecting interesting texts, relevant for the students' age, language level and interests, as well as by devising inciting pre-reading activities, aimed at arousing interest and curiosity.

c) Knowledge of the world

We never approach a text without referring it to our previous experience of the domain, topic, author, culture or context. Thus any new information is integrated with our previous knowledge of the world, by which we contribute meaning to the text. In class, the pre-reading stage should exploit and activate the students' relevant knowledge.

d) Knowledge of culture

In our first language, comprehension is aided by our knowledge of our culture and everyday reality. With authentic texts, which are inherently culture-bound, the cultural gap may impede the comprehension of certain issues, details, references, names, jokes, anecdotes. It is the teacher's task to provide the necessary background information so as to alleviate cultural incomprehension.

e) Knowledge of text types

Our knowledge of the world and culture also help us assign a text to a category/text type – newspaper/magazine article, letter, diary, essay, short-story, novel, scientific book. A classroom reading programme should acquaint students with a variety or text types in the foreign language.

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STAGING IN INTENSIVE READING ACTIVITIES

As opposed to real life or extensive reading, classroom reading in a foreign language, also called **intensive reading**, involves tasks aimed at developing the students' comprehension skills and reading strategies. Even if the tasks are designed to simulate or replicate the principles and strategies underlying real reading, they will still retain their didactic character of teaching/learning techniques, inherently intensive in terms of procedure and conditions. A classroom reading activity sequence should comprise three important stages: **pre-reading, while-reading** and **post-reading**. The tasks at each stage are meant to reflect the interactive aspects and operations at work in everyday reading and to train the particular sub-skills engaged in effective reading comprehension.

1. PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

In real life, we hardly ever engage with a reading text with an empty mind – we always have some idea of what we are going to read about. We are able to make some predictions about content, topics or ideas, based on our previous knowledge of the context, text (discourse) type, topic, background (temporal/spatial setting). The pre-reading stage is meant to replicate these conditions by warming the students up to the topic, activating their relevant general knowledge and encouraging them to make predictions about what they will read/learn about. Prediction tasks will also arouse interest and curiosity, as the students will be eager to check if their predictions were true.

a) Predicting/anticipating topic/content from paratextual features (title, picture, illustrations, front cover)

The **lead-in** phase will consist in involving the students in making predictions about what they are going to read, on the basis of the paratextual features which a fluent reader uses to anticipate content – titles, headline, headings, pictures, illustrations, front-page or cover. The teacher asks the students to use one or several of the above features to speculate about the likely content of the text. The students are encouraged to talk about the anticipated topic or ideas and about any relevant previous experience, knowledge, attitudes or preferences. E.g.: *What information would you expect to find in the following reading text?*

- A newspaper article with the headline ***Plane Crashes in the Andes***
- A chapter in a popular science book called ***Comets***
- A romantic story called ***I'm Lost*** which begins: *I know I haven't spoken for a while, but I was thinking about you and it*

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kind of made me smile. So many things to say, and I'll put them in a letter...

As shown above, predictions can be made from a first sentence/paragraph. Alternatively, the students can be asked to make predictions from a number of words taken out from the text.

b) Brainstorming/predicting ideas on the topic

The students will answer such questions as: 'What would you like to know about the text?/What do you already know about the subject of the text?' They can work in pairs or groups to brainstorm ideas based on their previous knowledge of the topic, which they can share with other pairs and groups until a complete list is put on the board. The students may be asked to predict which ideas or issues are most likely to come up in the text.

c) Raising questions/expectations

This is an interest-raising task, meant to increase the students' motivation to read the text. The underlying principle is that we normally read because there is something we want to find out, some information we want to check or clarify or some opinion we want to match against our own. If in the above brainstorming activity the students are asked to write down what they already know about the topic, this time they are required to think about what they would like to know and to write down any questions which they would like answered. The questions may be based on a given title, a suggestive picture illustration, a first sentence or paragraph, a set of key words. The activity is meant to activate the students' previous knowledge, to get them to connect old and new information and formulate expectations about learning what interests them. It increases motivation as it gets students to personalise their reasons for reading – to have their own questions answered.

d) Anticipating topic vocabulary – vocabulary pre-teaching/post-teaching considerations

A reader usually uses his previous knowledge of the topic to anticipate lexical content. Students should be involved in brainstorming and activating the words they know about the topic and compile a common list of words which they think might come up in the text. While reading, they can be asked to check their vocabulary predictions. If the teacher thinks the text contains words likely to hinder comprehension, he/she may choose to pre-teach them or ask students to look them up in the dictionary. If not, it would be preferable to postpone working with words until the post-reading stage, which will be more productive, as it gives students the chance to deal with new words in a more natural and interactive way, that is to guess their meaning from context.

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2. WHILE-READING ACTIVITIES

At the while-reading stage of a reading activity, the primary activity should consist in learners reading texts silently and doing comprehension tasks set by the teacher. While the students are reading, the teacher should keep a low profile and allow students to explore the text in silence, without unnecessary interruptions. If the students work on reading task-sheet, the class feedback session can be done at the end of each activity or, preferably, at the end of the lesson.

Reading comprehension tasks should be aimed at training the two important reading strategies and sub-skills: **skimming** (identifying **the main idea** or **gist** of a text) and **scanning** (focussing on **specific information/details** in a text). During a reading lesson, it is desirable that students should have both skimming and scanning exercises.

2.1. SKIMMING TASKS

Skimming (through) a text means reading quickly or perusing the text for the main idea/gist, without reading word by word or sentence by sentence. It is the strategy we normally use for global comprehension or getting a general idea of a text or book. It involves speed-reading, i.e. browsing/leafing through pages or looking over a text to get the main idea in the shortest time possible. That is why skimming activities should always be done within a set time-limit, with the teacher specifying the allocated time from the beginning and timing the students' reading. The time limit should be carefully thought out – it should be short to encourage speed, but realistic in terms of task complexity, as too short a time frame may frustrate students who haven't been able to finish the task. Matching a title to an article can take two minutes, while ordering jumbled paragraphs may take 10 minutes.

a) Matching titles/headlines/headings/topic sentences to text/paragraphs

These activities can be done with several texts/excerpts or on a single text. With several texts, the students can be asked to match 3-4 headlines/summaries with the corresponding news items, or some titles/summaries with texts of different types. On a single text, the students can do a multiple matching exercise based on a number of headings or summary statements to be matched with the corresponding sections or paragraphs in the text. A variation can be offering a text in which the topic sentences of the paragraphs have been erased, and the jumbled topic sentences which the students have to match to the corresponding paragraph.

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b) Identifying the topic (of a text or paragraph)

This is a variation of the above activity, requiring the skimming of a text or paragraph to identify the topic. The students will state the topic themselves or can answer a multiple choice question. They should also be taught to exploit the role of the topic sentence in a paragraph.

c) Summarising the gist of a text/paragraph (by a title/heading/sentence)

Students are required to skim a text or paragraph and suggest a title, heading or sentence which best summarises its main idea.

d) Ordering jumbled paragraphs

The students are given cut-outs containing the paragraphs of a text. In pairs or groups, students have to put them in the right order within a relatively short time limit. The students will have to take into account the logical sequence/coherence of the paragraphs, as well as the linking words or topic sentences which can provide clues as to what may come before or after each paragraph. The groups report their results and explain the ordering clues they have used.

e) Jigsaw reading

A variation on the above activity can take the form of a **jigsaw reading**, where each student in a group is given a different paragraph. The one who thinks is the first will tell the others a summary of his/her paragraph, and each of them will do the same when they consider they come next. At the end they put their paragraphs together and check results. The activity integrates reading with listening and speaking.

f) Comprehension/open-ended questions

Comprehension questions can be aimed at checking general comprehension if they are focused on important areas of meaning rather than on details. They help guide the students' reading of the text – good questions should focus their attention on the main points and lead them to think about the meaning of the text. E.g.: *What is the writer's main argument against zoos? Do you agree with it?*

2.2. SCANNING TASKS

Such tasks are aimed at training the students to scan the text for bits of specific information. Scanning strategies also presuppose speed-reading, so the teacher should set time limits for any such exercises. Scanning activities can be applied to any kind of text or to more specialised texts. To replicate the real life contexts in which we use this reading strategy to focus on the information we need, we should illustrate them by special purpose texts such as transport timetables, TV guides, tourist brochures, travel information guides/leaflets, user's manuals, menus, directories, etc.

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a) Yes/No questions/ True/false statements

This is a quite simple and common exercise, extremely useful for scanning activities, as it focuses the students' attention to items of specific information. It can also be organised as a reading competition, whose winner is the first to answer the questions correctly.

b) Special/Wh-questions

Special questions provide students with both a purpose and a clear focus while reading. The expected answers can be shorter or longer, depending on the complexity of the response required. If used with systematised informative texts such as timetables, TV or tourist guides, this exercise also lends itself to a competition, with the winner being the first one to find the answers.

E.g.: *What film is on Channel 4 on at 8 pm on Monday?/What time is the Docklands Museum open at weekends? What is the entrance fee?*

c) Detailed comprehension questions

Comprehension questions are, more often than not, the most commonly widespread exercise for checking detailed comprehension and focusing the students' attention on particular items of information. They show the teacher and the students themselves how well they have understood the text, and what needs to be more fully explained.

d) Inference questions

Inference questions are meant to get the students probe into the meaning of the text at a deeper level and infer or 'guess at' potential shades of meaning not explicitly expressed, but rather suggested by the text. In other words, inference can be defined by reading between the lines for meaning, ideas, attitudes, stances, motivations, moods or feelings which are only obliquely or indirectly touched upon or understated. Inference questions also train the students' ability of identifying the writer's purpose and tone. E.g.: *Why do you think the girl decided not to leave home after all?*/*Why does the story begin with a pre-view of the ending scene? What is the role of the long enumeration in paragraph 3?*

e) Information transfer (grid completion)

The students are given a grid/table with different headings referring to specific items of information. They have to complete the table with brief notes of the relevant information required by each heading – that is to 'transfer information' to a different kind of format. The main purpose of completing the table is to help focus the students' attention on the main points of a text, and make it easier for them to organise the information in their minds. Besides, by giving students' practice in note-taking, the activity helps them to develop efficient note-taking skills and systematise information in a concise manner – which is very important for their study

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skills. For example, if working on a text concerning a personality profile, the headings may be: *Hometown, Family, Education, First job, First film/Hollywood success/Oscar nomination/award, Home, Marriage and children, Earnings, Charity causes, etc.*

f) Reading race/competitions

Bringing an element of fun to a reading activity is a worthwhile variation, as it helps build both motivation and confidence. Competitive activities may be concerned with either skimming or scanning skills. Arranging jumbled paragraphs/sentences can be used for skimming, while scanning activities, as already illustrated above, may involve finding answers to a number of questions within a certain time limit, filling in gaps with the missing phrases from a list. The activities can be played individually or in groups.

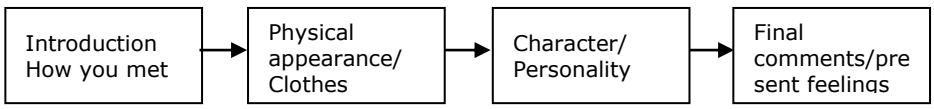
2.3. EXPLORING TEXT ORGANISATION

Text organisation constitutes an aid to comprehension in itself, therefore students should be taught to exploit the logical, rhetorical and linguistic devices which hold a text together and help clarify meaning. Apart from facilitating comprehension, exercises which draw attention to text organisation features are essential in helping students with their own writing, as it is commonly known that good readers usually make good writers. Consequently, such awareness-raising activities have a much wider scope, in that they are training reading sub-skills and strategies which, implicitly and naturally lead into writing.

a) Examining text organisation elements

To begin with, thinking of text organisation features help consolidate the students' knowledge of text types. Assigning the text to a type means an awareness of defining organisational features, which we use in distinguishing between letters, articles, argumentative essays, literary or scientific texts. Engaging students in evaluating paragraph sequencing and the relationship between the different parts/sections of a text can be done through any skimming exercise which requires multiple matching (main ideas and paragraphs), identifying the topic or gist of each paragraph or ordering jumbled paragraphs. After identifying the main topic and paragraph divisions of a text, students can be asked to complete a diagram illustrating the format/plan/outline of the text, which they can use as a model for their own writing assignments. For example, a text descriptive essay model for describing people can be represented as follows.

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Students can also be involved in examining paragraph construction, which also teaches them how to write a good paragraph themselves. They can examine the way in which the main idea and supporting details are organised within a paragraph by analysing the role/function of each sentence – the topic sentence and supporting statements. E.g.: Decide how the other sentences in paragraph 2 expand the information given in the topic/key sentence. Does any of them: a) give examples? b) give a further explanation? c) give a judgement? d) do a mixture of the above? e) do something else?

b) Text coherence

Text coherence concerns the logical connection and arrangement between ideas, paragraphs or sentences in a text and the use of **discourse markers** (sentence adverbs or adverbial phrases signalling order and sequence, additional new points, contrasting points, etc.) in ensuring the logical flow of ideas. Activities focused on coherence can involve identifying a paragraph or sentence which does not belong in the text, ordering jumbled sentences, deciding the order of 3-4 expressions taken out of the text or examining the functions of the **linking phrases** or **discourse markers** mentioned above.

c) Text cohesion

Text cohesion concerns the syntactic and lexical mechanisms which hold the text together or make it cohere at discrete level – how ideas and sentences are joined or related to each other. Activities may involve identifying and analysing the use of the **cohesive devices** within a sentence or paragraph – linkers, conjunctions, demonstrative pronouns, articles, anaphoric reference (backwards, to a previous element) or cataphoric reference (forwards, to a subsequent element) references. E.g.: *What does 'it'/'this'/'that'/'do so' in line 25 refer to?*

3. POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Post-reading activities usually deal with the students' reactions to the text. They encourage students to comment on ideas, agree/disagree with issues, share opinions and impressions about what they have read, make value judgements, assess experiences, etc. They also promote the integration of reading with other skills (speaking, listening, writing), since, as it happens in real life, reading is often a pre-text for talking or writing.

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a) Evaluation and response

A reader usually evaluates and reacts to a text in various ways – discussing with others, exchanging opinions, agreeing, disagreeing, arguing in favour or against points in the text, writing/doing something in response, changing certain habits or behaviours, etc. Students can be asked to react in a quite simple, yet telling manner:

E.g.: *Read/say aloud the sentence in the text which*:

- you like best
- you most agree/disagree with
- you will tell your parents/friends about
- impressed you the most
- set you thinking/gave you food for thought
- changed your perspective on the matter
- made you want to do/change something

b) Discussions, debates

These are more ample activities regarding the reactions mentioned about, in which students can discuss in pairs or groups certain issues related to the text. They may be asked to interpret/explain certain facts or ideas/comment on situations and people/find solutions to problems presented/think or speculate on of causes and effects/plan a course of action, etc.

c) Jigsaw reading

This is an approach to reading which involves the students in speaking and summarising skills. It is very useful when working with short authentic texts such as newspaper articles. Jigsaw reading is a great way to introduce speaking into a reading lesson. It provides a real opportunity for genuine communication. In real life, we may tell people about a news article we have read, so this is a classroom activity that is fairly authentic. Jigsaw reading can be done in two ways:

i. Two separate stories

We can use two news stories which share a theme – for example two separate stories on holidays gone wrong. The teacher prepares comprehension questions for each story and gives one half of the class (Group A) one story, and the other half (Group B) the other. The students read their article, answer the questions and check understanding. Students then pair up with someone from the other group and tell them about their story, and listen to the other one. To help students remember their story we may get them to take notes, but,

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in order to keep the challenge, we should not allow them to take the article with them to refer to.

ii. One story split in two

Some stories can be clearly divided in two. We can follow the same procedure as above, but giving each group only one half of the story. When the students are recounting their half of the article, we should make sure that the student with the opening half goes first. The activity integrates reading with listening and speaking.

d) Role-play

Role-play activities can be used with texts focused on people – personality profiles, biographies, historical documents, outstanding people's achievements, or with literary characters. Assuming the role of certain characters in the reading, students can ask/answer questions and speculate on the motives or reasons of their actions, the nature of their experiences, etc.

e) Imaginary interviews

The students, acting as themselves this time, are asked to write interview questions they would like to ask a person they have read about in a reading text. They can also be encouraged to imagine the potential answers or can interview other students who will play the part of the imaginary interviewee.

f) **Written response activities**

Reading activities should also be used as a springboard for writing activities. Students are asked to respond in writing to issues they have read about. For instance, they can write letters (to the editor, complaint, enquiry), reports, proposals, leaflets, manifestoes, articles, etc. They can write as themselves or, especially with human interest stories or literary texts, which lend themselves to role-playing, they can assume the role of a character, writing a letter or a diary entry from his/her perspective. Other challenging tasks may be writing a continuation to a story or a different ending.

g) Vocabulary building tasks

Reading texts are usually a rich source of new vocabulary, therefore they should be used for vocabulary expansion. Providing the new words do not hinder comprehension, it is usually worthwhile postponing vocabulary matters to the post-reading stage, telling students not to worry about the words they don't know. This helps prepare students psychologically to deal with unknown vocabulary and accustoms them to guessing meaning from context. Consequently, post-reading vocabulary tasks should be based on discovery and inference techniques: matching words/phrases with definitions; multiple choice definitions/explanations; finding synonyms/antonyms for words given by

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the teacher; using the words in sentences of their own, writing a text using the new words.

4. ENCOURAGING EXTENSIVE READING

Motivating students to read extensively outside the classroom should be the envisioned corollary of any reading programme. Well-conducted intensive reading activities have their role in increasing motivation for reading, but they should be supplemented by class activities specially targeted at extensive reading.

As in real life, books should be talked about, commented, recommended and passed around. Therefore the teacher should organise regular sessions in which individual students report on their writing and recommend a book to their peers. The teacher can provide the students with a simple format for a book review, containing such headings as: Title, Author, Plot, Characters, Why I liked it.

Whatever strategies and activities we may devise to encourage our students to read widely, they should highlight the value of reading in the foreign language as a pleasurable, rewarding and enriching pastime, which benefits learners of English in the long run, from the viewpoint of linguistic acquisition, cross-cultural education or professional information, as well as from a personal and social perspective.

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