THE IMPORTANCE OF READING IN ESP CLASSES

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Abstract *The paper aims to emphasize the importance of reading in the teaching/learning of any foreign language. Reading is known to be a complex cognitive activity and students are faced with several difficulties when trying to improve their reading skills. The multiple interrelations between speaking and listening, reading and writing show that they are not distinct areas of learning and they cannot be approached separately. Most ESP teachers resort to a needs analysis in order to find out which language skills the student will need mostly in his/her future activity. The approach to needs analysis depends largely on the situation and on the context. Making a clear distinction between extensive and intensive reading, the paper shows how specialized reading motivates students to develop their vocabulary and to extend their knowledge about their field of study and how it stimulates them to use English productively in everyday situations.*

Keywords*: skills, extensive, intensive*

Introduction

Reading is an essential skill in the teaching/learning of any foreign language. It is generally known to be a complex cognitive activity and students are faced with several difficulties when trying to improve their reading skills.

It is commonly agreed that in ESL the four language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) are given the same importance. The multiple interrelations between speaking and listening, reading and writing show that they are not distinct areas of learning and they cannot be approached separately. Progress in one area depends closely on progress in all the other three areas. Becoming aware of the way the four language skills are connected helps and encourages learners to transfer knowledge acquired in one area to the others. In ESP things are different. Most ESP teachers resort to a needs analysis in order to find out which language skills the student will need mostly in his/her future activity. The approach to needs analysis depends largely on the situation and on the context. Pilbeam (Pilbeam, 1979:2) shows that needs analysis should be connected with establishing a target profile of language skills which sets down the tasks that the participants have to carry out (Target Situation Analysis) as well as a profile of personal skills in which the participants' skills in these tasks are assessed (Present Situation Analysis).

Reading helps students enrich and diversify their vocabulary. It is a good chance for them to hear and recognize words and expressions they have heard during the English class, but which they were not able to use in their own sentences. In other words, by offering students reading materials, teachers encourage them to turn their passive vocabulary into active vocabulary. They also stimulate students to use a dictionary when coming across unfamiliar words.

The process of reading is not restricted to the mere identification of letters, words and sentences. It is based on the readers' use of their background knowledge. It is this knowledge that helps them anticipate further information in the text. ESP students

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read a text with a clear purpose in mind. Being interested in the topic of the text, they want to get more information about it and develop their vocabulary which can be used in relation to it.

Reading skills in ESL

A reading skill is defined as a very complex cognitive ability which a learner can make use of when dealing with a written text. Reading skills include identifying the meaning of the word in context, making inferences, understanding explicitly and implicitly stated information, finding the main idea of the text, recognizing details, skimming and scanning. In order to develop these skills, ESP teachers should resort to two types of reading tasks: intensive and extensive. The former refers to an attentive analysis of a short fragment and may be used to help students enrich their vocabulary, develop their grammar skills and comprehension. The latter is meant to encourage students to improve their reading speed as well as to find the main ideas of the text and concentrate on them.

Harmer draws a clear distinction between extensive and intensive reading, stressing the importance of involving students in both types of reading. In the first case, teachers encourage their students "to choose for themselves what they want to read and to do so for pleasure and general language improvement" (Harmer, 2013:283) while, in the second case, it is teachers who select reading materials in order to stimulate students to develop specific receptive skills such as skimming, scanning, reading for detailed comprehension or reading for inferences.

Intensive reading is a teacher centered approach. It is the teacher who decides what to read, when to read, what grammar and points of vocabulary will be talked about. The drawback with intensive reading is that so much attention is concentrated on sentence level syntax that the purpose of the reading task turns from developing reading skills into developing grammar skills.

Extensive reading is sometimes described as opposed to intensive reading and often as complimentary to it. It is successful if students select materials which are accessible to them. Since the purpose of this activity is the very pleasure of reading, they shouldn't be reading intricate texts, full of unknown words. On the other hand, the selected texts should meet their exact needs in point of content. They will lose their interest quickly if the texts contain information they are not at all interested in. The drawback with this kind of activity is that there are a lot of students who lose their enthusiasm too quickly and they need permanent stimulation and encouragement from their teachers.

Reading skills in English for Specific Purposes

A reading text is no longer seen as a linguistic tool, but as a vehicle of information. Being able to extract the main information correctly is much more important than being aware of all the language details. The study of the language is not as important as understanding the macrostructure of the text. There is a very strong connection between good reading and language and skills. Poor foreign language learners can have "a fragmented approach to text" while good learners are able to go for "overall meaning, guessing or skipping language and information" (Dudley-Evans, St John, 2007:96). Poor reading in the L1 leads to poor reading in a foreign language.

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Learners cannot be expected to transfer any L1 skills to their L2 reading materials if they are not at an intermediate level of language proficiency.

Several questions arise when dealing with the topic of teaching reading to ESP learners. One of them is whether ESP teaching is limited to teaching reading comprehension. The ESP course might be oriented towards the teaching of reading comprehension, but this does not mean that ESP is restricted to this skill. The ESP course is designed to perfectly meet the needs of the learners. These needs may vary from person to person, from time to time, and also from place to place.

Another question is how much vocabulary ESP students need in order to be comfortable readers of specialized reading materials. "In comprehension, deducing the meaning of vocabulary from the context and from the structure of the actual word is the most important method of learning new vocabulary. For production purposes, storage and retrieval are significant" (Dudley Evans & et. al., 2007:99).

According to Grabe and Stoller, in order to be able to read a text comfortably, skilled readers need to be familiar with at least 95% of the words occurring in it. It is to be added that familiar words include even those words students recognize, but are unable to use in their own sentences. The authors (Grabe, Stoller, 2002:79) emphasize the importance of focusing on the 2000 to 3000 most common words in a language as "essential foundation for word-recognition automaticity, and then on vocabulary that is appropriate to specific topics and fields of study". Existing computerized corpora will help students determine which the most common words are.

Do L1 reading abilities influence L2 reading abilities? Although L1 reading abilities and L2 reading abilities are based on the same component skills, they differ from each other in many respects. Transfer is defined in many ways. It may be seen as an overlapping of two languages or the influence of the native language or of an already acquired language on the target language. When starting to study ESP, Romanian learners use, consciously or unconsciously, different resources from Romanian in order to develop their skills in English. The existence of similarities between L1 and L2 will make the L2 acquisition easier. In our case, students training to become computer programmers, for instance, will find it much easier to improve their reading skills in English thanks to the overlap between the English technical vocabulary and the Romanian technical vocabulary specific to their field of study. On the contrary, the existence of similarities between the English economics vocabulary and the Romanian one may turn out to be misleading. For instance, Romanian students have a tendency to translate words such as *interest* and *stock* as *interes* and *stoc* instead of *dobanda* and *actiune*. The overall comprehension of a text will be hindered by such confusions.

How much grammatical knowledge and discourse knowledge do students need in order to be able to read effectively? In the teaching of ESP, grammar is often ignored, a lot of ESP teachers minimizing its role. According to Dudley Evans & et. al., "for reading, where the learners' grammatical weaknesses interfere with comprehension of meaning, the relationship between meaning and form can be taught in context through analysis and explanation. This often includes the verb form, notably tense and voice, modals, particularly in relation to the expression of certainty and uncertainty, connectors, noun compounds and various expressions. If students are expected to present written work, serious weaknesses in grammar require more specific help" (Dudley-Evans, 2007:75).

Arguments that L2 readers do not need grammar knowledge are obviously wrong. It may be possible for ESP readers to be familiar with most of the vocabulary

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and to understand the main idea of the text without being able to follow the development of the text and to keep up with the information it introduces. L2 proficiency plays an important part in developing L2 reading skills. L2 learners can successfully resort to skills and strategies that are part of their L1 reading comprehension abilities. A reading material may be inaccessible to learners because they are totally unfamiliar with the topic, because they find the text badly-structured or because they are given too little time to read it. It is generally stated that students at a beginning or intermediate level transfer reading skills and strategies from L1 to L2. At a beginning L2 level, students usually rely on their L1 language abilities, their L1 reading abilities as well as on their knowledge of the world. These resources may help them complete their task or, on the contrary, they may act as an obstacle.

The connection between reading and writing

There is an obvious connection between reading and writing. They are interdependent processes, they are both personal and social activities and they influence each other in the process of learning.

By reading extensively, students develop their writing skills. They enrich their vocabulary by learning words and structures which they can subsequently use in their own writings. They can also acquire new information, which they can make use of in their writing tasks. On the other hand, practice in writing helps students develop their reading skills.

Conclusions

To sum it up, we can say that specialized reading motivates students to develop their vocabulary and to extend their knowledge about their field of study and also stimulates them to use English productively in everyday situations.

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