



A New Way to Teach Reading

The approach to teaching reading has remained basically the same for decades. This traditional approach consists of involving a fairly standard set of tasks and skills. This paper will argue that these tasks and the related skills are largely ineffective in training students to become better readers. But before that discussion begins, a brief look at the traditional tasks is necessary.

Activate Schemata

The idea is that students will likely understand and retain more from a text if they think about the content beforehand. This strategy became commonplace in English language teaching because studies done with proficient native speaker readers revealed that those who thought about the content of a text before they read tended to understand and retain more than other readers. The way that this strategy is usually dealt with in coursebooks is that the students are given a question based on the content of the text. They are then asked to discuss it in pairs or small groups. Teachers working without supplied coursebook questions will often say something like, “You are going to read a text about X. Talk to your partner and find out what they know about X.”

Drawbacks

The biggest problem with the way activating schemata is usually dealt with is that the questions are given to the students. While this may work in class, nobody outside the classroom is going to give the learner a question to ponder before they read something. And since the ultimate goal is (or should be) to teach learners strategies that they can use in the real world, handing them tasks or questions before they read is not giving them any training that is, in itself, worthwhile.

Gist Read

The gist read is done by skimming over the text very quickly to get an overall idea of what it’s about. In coursebooks, it’s usually used in conjunction with a supplied gist question, one question designed to get students to get some general idea of the overall content. Typically, after students have activated their schemata, they read the gist question and then skim the text to answer it. The teacher would then elicit the answer to it from the students. Teachers not working with texts from standard coursebooks will have to compose their own gist question. It’s often harder than it seems as a good gist question needs to get students to focus on the entire text. But the strategy of reading a text over quickly for gist comprehension is a good one and one that is based on studies of the habits of effective native-speaker readers.

Drawbacks

Skimming is one of the few reading strategies taught in a conventional classroom that is easily transferable to the outside world. The problem with gist reading, as with activating schemata, is that the learners will not be provided with a gist question when they are outside the classroom. In this case, it’s not a huge problem as the learner can simply skim the text to find out what it is about.



Comprehension Questions

There are two ways of using comprehension questions. One way would be to have the students read the text first and then read the questions afterwards and try to answer them from their memory of the text. Used this way, the questions serve only to test the students' comprehension and have absolutely no strategic value. The other way to use them is to have students read the questions before reading the text. Used that way, the questions are meant to get students to focus on important information when they read, taking for granted that they can keep all the questions in mind and focus on the parts of the text that may have the answers.

Drawbacks

As mentioned above, having students read a text first and then answer comprehension questions has no strategic value. Nothing is being learned or practiced that students can use to help them understand other texts, either in the class or outside of it. On the other hand, having them read the questions first does imply that it's best to have something in mind before you read, ideally some questions that you can read to find the answer for. That is a useful strategy and, once again, originally based on the habits of proficient native-speaker readers. However, the questions provided are specific to the text to be read and when students go to read a text outside the classroom, there will be no questions provided for them to read before going through the text.

Determine Unknown Words from Context

Decades ago the way that unknown words were usually dealt with was that they were "pre-taught" before the students actually read the text. The idea, of course, was to give students whatever they needed to help them understand the text. However, it was then pointed out that native speakers tend to determine meaning of unknown words from their context while they read, usually with such efficiency that the natural flow of reading was uninterrupted. Pre-teaching of vocabulary became frowned upon as it was felt that it robbed the learners of the chance to develop that essential reading skill. In addition, it was felt that learners needed to take a step towards autonomy by developing their ability to comprehend texts with unknown words in them.

The way that a lot of coursebooks dealt with vocabulary after the "pre-teaching" era was to give students exercises to determine the meaning of unknown words after they had read for comprehension. Typically, a matching exercise was employed and the students were expected to find the word in the text (line or paragraph numbers were often supplied) and then use the context to match the word to the correct meaning.

Drawbacks

Recent studies have shown that it is not realistic to expect learners to be able to determine meaning from context while reading. Tests showed that it was only the absolutely highest levels of learners that were able to do it and the studies suggested that the reader needed to know the meaning of almost all of the words in the text to be able to decipher the ones they don't know. In addition, learners who were attempting to decipher the meaning of unknown words were giving them too much focus and, in doing so, were losing comprehension of what they had already read. As mentioned above, native-speaker readers are able to speculate about the meaning of unknown



words automatically, without interrupting the natural flow of their reading. Only very high level learners can do that.

Books which get students to first read the text for comprehension and then go back and deal with certain unknown words offer an approach that avoids the problem mentioned in the previous paragraph. Even though it's after reading for comprehension, students still need to look at the context to speculate about the meaning. Normally they just have to choose from a selection of supplied definitions. One of the problems with these sorts of exercises is that the coursebook writer has made assumptions about what words the students won't know. And often students are able to match words with their meaning, not because they have determined meaning from context, but simply because they have some familiarity with the word already. Also, in choosing words to focus on, the coursebook writers have likely omitted words that certain students don't know. It makes no sense to assume that all students at the same levels will know all the same words and be unfamiliar with all the same words.

The other major drawback to supplied matching exercises is that, like previously mentioned skills, students will not have those exercises supplied for them when they read authentic material outside the class. What is needed is a strategy that they can use without reliance on supplied definitions.

Discussion

It's very common in class materials that a reading text will be followed by some questions for students to discuss, based on the content of the text. This seems like a logical way to finish up a reading lesson as it gives students a chance to share their ideas on what they have read and it allows them to get some speaking practice in a lesson where the primary focus had been receptive skills.

Drawbacks

There is nothing inherently wrong with people discussing something they've read. However, with most of the reading that we do in real life, there is no discussion phase afterwards. Besides this obvious disconnect from the outside world, the extra post-task speaking does not provide the learners with any skills that will help them become better readers outside the classroom.

A New Approach

Comprehension Stages

Activate Schemata

Since there will be nobody in the outside world to do this for students, they need to learn to do this on their own in the classroom. It would seem to be a problem getting students to think about the content of the text before they've read it and found out what it is about but there are actually two good ways of doing that.

Predicting Content Based on Titles and Visuals

Very often, titles and accompanying pictures will give a reader a good idea of what the text is about. To use titles and visuals to activate schemata, students merely need to take a quick look at them and then think to themselves what they already know about the topic and what they think the text will say about it. Consider the title of this text, "A New Way to Teach Reading." Based on the title, a reader could think about what they already knew about teaching reading. Then, after deciding that the teaching of reading mostly involved testing comprehension, they could guess that the text would offer an alternative. In fact, the reading strategy of speculating about content based on titles and/or visuals is actually well-represented in a lot of course materials, particularly those that prepare students for reading tasks found on exams. The important thing about this reading strategy is that the classroom training students get will provide them with a useful technique that they can use whenever they read, in class or outside of it.

Predicting Content Based on Genre

There will be many cases where the title and visuals will not be enough to give a reader a good indication of what the text is about. In this case, knowledge of the text genre can give learners a good idea of the content of the text. For example, readers should know that a restaurant review will typically contain an indication of the type of food served, certain dishes that stand out, the quality of the service and an overall recommendation. After considering the genre of the text, readers can then think about what they consider to be typical content of that writing genre. That will give them some aspects of the text to activate their schemata and also some information on which to base some predictions about the specific content of the text. Consider the restaurant review below, which came from the *Toronto Star*. There are no visuals and the title of the text does not provide any information as to what the text is specifically about. However, as suggested above, there is information in the text about the type of food served, certain dishes that stand out, the quality of service and an overall recommendation. There is, of course, other information in the text which is typical of the genre like price, location, etc.



Miga

Steak or sizzle?

At Miga on Bloor, it's both.

Every table at the stylish Koreatown restaurant has a natural gas grill built into it for do-it-yourself bulgogi. It opened last December in a former McDonald's, the younger sibling of Miga in Mississauga.

At lunchtime, the grills are covered and the restaurant focuses on stone pot meals. But it pays to let Miga do the cooking for you.

Spicy pork stone pot, a \$9.95 lunch special. First comes a bowl of miso soup and five panchan, complimentary Korean pickles and cooked vegetables.

In addition to the customary red cabbage kimchi, I dip wooden chopsticks into sour napa cabbage, crumpled watercress, tender potatoes in honeyed sesame bean sprouts.

The main event announces itself long before it hits the table. I hear the sizzle of the stone pot – heated to searing on a gas range – and smell the chilies coming toward me.

The pork, which staff call *dolsot Mae un daeji* in Korean, is a beautiful thing. (Not so much the broken short-grain rice, which forms a golden crust due to the bowl's heat.) Tender, juicy and not too fatty, boneless neck meat is grilled then slathered in sauce developed by head chef In Seo Song. She uses 20 ingredients, including Korean chilies, miso paste, gochujang (spicy fermented bean paste), garlic and granulated sugar.

The fire is immediate, intense and invigorating. Three bites in, I take off my sweater. I keep eating, relishing the sweet heat. Japanese lager Kirin Gold (\$4.95) helps quench my thirst.

Lunch ends with dessert, of sorts: A miniature pot of roasted green tea "for digestion," explains the server. The mellow tannins are the perfect palate cleanser.

http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/2009/11/09/toronto_star_restaurant_reviews.html

Composing Comprehension Questions Based on Genre

There is an easy way to convert the reading and answering of comprehension questions to a strategy that students can use outside the classroom. The trick is to get them to first think about the content based on their knowledge of the genre and then have them compose comprehension questions based on their ideas. They can actually write the questions down but, after doing this a few times, the students will get to the point where they will be just thinking of the questions beforehand and then they can keep them in mind as they read. The following questions were composed by a class of intermediate students before they read the restaurant review above. The students were not given the text but just told that they would be reading a restaurant review.

1. What kind of food do they serve?
2. How about the service?
3. What hours is it open?
4. Why do people like it or not like it?
5. What is the quality of the food like?
6. Where is it?
7. Is it expensive?
8. How about the atmosphere?
9. Are there other locations?
10. How is the food prepared?



Note that all of the questions are answerable in the text, although the answer to the question about the quality of the food must be inferred. However, the fact that readers may have to make inferences to answer certain question is a valuable reading strategy. Note that even if a question that readers came up with does not have an answer in the text, they can still “answer” the question by saying that the question was not actually answered in the text. The point of having questions before reading is that it helps readers focus and it draws their attention to important information in the text. For example, if the restaurant Miga did not have another location, the fact that students were reading with that question in mind would lead them to read with just a little more focus. The whole idea of reading with questions in mind is a classroom strategy that was developed based on the habits of proficient native-speaker readers. Those readers thought of questions before reading and even if the answer did not appear, the fact that they were reading for it increased their comprehension and retention. The idea of having students compose their own comprehension is a direct application of the native-speaker strategy, unlike existing classroom materials which use it indirectly by supplying the questions.

Composing Comprehension Questions Based on Titles and Visuals

When there is a title and/or a visual which suggests the content of the text, students can use it to compose comprehension questions based on content that can be predicted. For example, based on the title of this text, readers could come up with the following list of questions:

1. What is the new way to teach reading?
2. What was the old way of teaching reading?
3. How is the new way different from the old way?
4. How is the new way the same as the old way?
5. How is the new way better than the old way?

Genre Analysis

Many students will already have an awareness of the characteristics of certain writing genres based on past exposure to them or reading examples in their own language. In cases where the students would not have enough awareness of a genre in order to anticipate the content a text, you can get them to analyze a couple examples of that genre.

Once you have let students know the genre you are going to be looking at, you should give pairs or small groups two samples of writing in that genre. Genre analysis usually involves looking at characteristics such as style, register, organization, etc., but for reading purposes, you only need to have them look at the content. What they will need to do is to read the two samples and come up with some conclusions about the general information they both contain. You may really need to emphasize what is meant by general information. For example, students looking at two restaurant reviews should not determine that both have information about their downtown Toronto location but should simply note that both have information about location.

When students have had enough time to read and discuss the genre samples, get some ideas from them and list them on the board. You may need to eliminate some ideas they came up with if they are not truly characteristics of the genre and you may need to add some others. Once you have the list on the board, students will have what they need to compose comprehension questions applicable to any other sample of the genre.



Gist Reading

With a relatively short text, it's always a good idea to have students skim it over to get some idea about the content of it. Of course, it's best if they have a question in mind before they do it. Since you want them to become independent from course materials, it's a good idea to teach them to come up with their own gist questions. There is a relatively easy way to do that. Once you have had students come up with a list of comprehension questions, they have to select one question which is fairly general and likely to be answered by reading the entire text rather than a particular segment of it. Initially, you can have them discuss in pairs or small groups which of their comprehension questions is best suited to this task. Then elicit their ideas and decide on one question. For example, with the list of questions for the restaurant review, question 5, about the quality of the food would be a good gist question. The important thing about having them do a gist read is that they skim the text very quickly for the answer. Students will often read much too slowly. In order to stop them from doing this, remind them that they will be reading the text again and that they are just supposed to get a basic idea of what it's about. You can also have them stand up and read it and tell them to sit down once they have finished. This will encourage the students to read quickly as they won't want to be the last one standing. It will also allow you to keep track of who is reading too slowly.

Once the students have done the gist read, elicit the answer to the question. You can have them discuss the answer before you elicit it. As with other strategies suggested here, any pair or group practice should eventually be converted into individual practice as the idea is to prepare students for doing the tasks independently in the outside world.

Reading for Comprehension

After students have composed comprehension questions, get them to read the text and try to answer them (in their heads, not in writing). You will need to remind them that it's possible that not all the answers will be in the text but that reading with a particular focus will aid comprehension and retention. A big advantage of having students compose comprehension questions before they read is that it will be relatively easy for them to keep them in mind while they read, since they had to go to the trouble of thinking them up beforehand. Also, with repeated practice with same genres, students will more or less automatically come up with the questions. You should also remind students that sometimes the answer will not be stated explicitly and that they will need to infer it. You can remind them that making inferences is an important reading skill.

When students have finished reading for comprehension, you can have them compare answers and refer to parts of the text to justify their answers. However, over time, you should gradually get them to do this task on their own. When students have had enough time to discuss or think about their answers, elicit them and, if deemed necessary, ask them to refer to parts of the text to justify their answers. This is especially important for inference questions.



Language Analysis Stages

Determining Meaning from Context

Since the focus on unknown words while reading for comprehension has proven to be counterproductive for language learners, it makes much more sense to have them practice this skill after they have processed the text for comprehension. The idea is that extensive practice with this task after reading will eventually lead learners to become so proficient at it that they will start determining meaning of unknown words while they read. And instead of giving them a list of words to work with, the students should go over the text and choose the words themselves. Once they have found a word, they can use this more or less standard procedure for determining meaning from context.

1. Determine the part of speech from the context and/or the form of the word. For example, seeing that a word precedes a verb will suggest it may be a noun. Also, seeing that the word ends in “ness” will confirm that it is a noun.
2. If possible, look for clues to meaning of the word based on its morphemes. For example, the word “unproductive” could be construed to mean “not producing” based on the prefix “un” and the root word “produce”.
3. Look at the words around the word for clues to its meaning.
4. Look at the sentences before and after the one the word is in for clues to its meaning.
5. Make a guess at the meaning of the word with a synonym or a phrase.
6. Try the guess in the sentence instead of the unknown word to see if it makes sense.

It is suggested that this procedure be done first as a whole class so students see how it's done and get some practice doing it. You can simply ask students for a word that they don't know and then check to see if anyone knows the meaning. If so, you can ask those students to refrain from guessing for the time being. Then go through the above steps and try to elicit answers for each step. This guided practice will help them a lot when they attempt it on their own. You can also add an intermediary step where students practice the procedure with a partner.

When students are at the stage where they are doing their own determining meaning from context, you should monitor and make a list of the words that they are working on. Then, after students have finished, you can check the meanings that they came up with and do any other clarification, as needed.

Extracting Useful Language

For some reason most course materials do not adequately use their texts as a source of language for students. This is unfortunate as those texts can provide students with lots of lexical structures that will not only expand their lexicon but also provide them with valuable training. The training that they get will be in recognizing useful lexical structures in a text, a skill that they can use whenever they encounter language outside the classroom. Of course, whether in the class or outside it, texts need to be dealt with thoroughly for comprehension first. However, once the learners have done that, they can go over the text and extract useful collocations and expressions. It should be pointed out to students that “useful” means items that they could see themselves using.



There are many ways to handle this task but one of the simplest is to put students in pairs and have them look for collocations in the text. When they have done that, you can ask each student to write down a specific number, say 5 or 10, that they think could be useful. After they've done that, elicit a few, get them on the board and provide any clarification as needed. You may also want to point out where other similar words could be substituted in some of the collocations.

Discussion

Discussion

Having a discussion about the text is a good way to finish off a lesson. However, it makes no sense for teachers (or coursebook writers) to read the text over again to come up with discussion questions. Get the students to work in pairs and come up with their own questions for discussion. A good way to do that is to give each pair (or small group) a board marker and when they come up with a discussion question, they go up and put it up on the board. That way you and the students can avoid repeating questions. When you have enough questions on the board, you can do some error correction with them, if you like. Then, either as a whole class or in small groups, students discuss the questions on the board. If you go with the small groups, get some feedback afterwards. The value of having the students create the questions is that it gives them motivation and an opportunity to look over the text one more time. It actually could be a reading strategy that they could use outside the class. Even though they will probably be on their own, they can still go over the text and think about what aspects of the text would be open to discussion.

Lesson Framework

Note that times are very approximate and lesson may go over one class.

Stage	Interaction	Procedure	Approx. Time
Warmer	S-S or S-S-S T-Ss	-Tell students what genre they will be reading. Ask them to talk about what they know of the genre and, if possible, its characteristics -Get feedback from students on the characteristics of the genre and augment, if necessary	10 - 15
Genre Analysis (Optional)	S-S or S-S-S T-Ss	- If students have limited knowledge of the characteristics of the genre, give them two samples and have them read them first for comprehension. -Ask students to think about what kinds of general content the two samples have in common. You will need to stress and possibly explain what you mean by 'general'. -Get some feedback on the genre characteristics and augment, if necessary.	10 - 15
Comprehension questions from genre	S-S or S-S-S T-Ss	-Based on their knowledge of the genre get students to compose comprehension questions. -Elicit some questions (no more than 10) and get them up on the board.	10 - 15
Comprehension questions from title and visuals	S-S or S-S-S T-Ss	-Have students look at the title and any visuals. Get them to compose comprehension questions based on the title/visuals. -Elicit some of their questions and get them up on the board.	5 - 10
Gist read	S-S or S-S-S T-Ss S T-Ss	-Ask students to discuss which of the questions they've written would be a good gist question. -Elicit their ideas and decide on the gist question. -Students read quickly for gist and to answer the question. - Elicit some of their ideas.	5
Comprehension Read	S S-S or S-S-S T-Ss	-Students read the text with the aim of answering the questions. -You can have them discuss the answers with one or two other students. -Elicit the answers and ask students if there was something in the text that confirms each one.	5 - 15
Language Analysis: Meaning from context	S T-Ss S-S T-Ss	-Ask students to go over the text and note words that they don't know -Elicit some of the words and go through the steps for determining meaning from context as a whole class -Have students work in pairs and try to determine the meaning of other unknown words -Elicit their ideas and clarify	10 - 20
Language Analysis: Extracting useful language	S-S T-Ss	-Ss work in pairs and look for useful collocations -Elicit some of their examples and clarify according to meaning, form and usage, where necessary	10 - 20
Discussion	S-S or S-S-S	-Ss work together and create some discussion questions -Get some of their questions on the board -Ss discuss the questions, whole class or small groups	15 - 20