

# Teaching Foreign / Second Language Reading: Instructional Guidance to Improve Teachers' Teaching

*S C Sood*

## Introduction

Reading is perhaps one of the areas in language learning/teaching (the first as well as the second language – L1/L2) that have received a lot of attention in recent years and much light has been thrown on what reading is, what different kinds of reading processes are, and what their implications are for language teaching – particularly in foreign/second language (FL/SL) teaching classrooms.<sup>1</sup> Much has also been written about the skills and strategies used by effective readers.

It is said that they:

- Know that both text and context are important to make sense and so read, keeping in mind background knowledge: content knowledge, culture-specific knowledge, formal knowledge about different text types and text-organisations, and general knowledge of the world. They seek this knowledge if they do not have it, or activate it if they have;
- Predict on the basis of their schematic knowledge what the writer might say in the given text and verify whether the prediction is correct; if not, revise the prediction. Expert readers invoke their schematic knowledge and the visual input is minimal. Reading for them is a linguistic guessing game and so they may not read each and every word;
- Understand what reading means: read silently, varying speed according to purpose and text, guess meanings of unfamiliar words and expressions, read in sense groups also called meaningful chunks;
- Are clear about the purpose of reading and so are motivated to read and know that stress, fear and anxiety can cause ‘short-circuit’ and hence avoid them;
- Read fast with fluency: have acquired ‘speed and accuracy’ and ‘automaticity’ of decoding (Eskey, 1988; Anderson, 2005; Grabe, 2009);
- Have linguistic competence: have vast passive vocabulary and keep learning new words and phrases (Coxhead, 2000; Bromley, 2004; Nation, 2001); new uses of known ones, phrasal verbs, linking devices and discourse markers; grammatical and lexical cohesion; and can process complex constructions;
- Pay attention to how the writer says what he says: logical development of ideas in the text;
- Pay attention to non-verbal information, if any
- Make inferences; and
- Have developed sensitivity to language: understand writer’s attitude, irony, sarcasm, choice of words and phrases, symbols, imagery, similes and metaphors including orthography of writing:

punctuation marks, quotations, italics, capitals, and so on.

This broader concept places reading not merely as a passive but an active – rather interactive – activity, not just decoding but interpreting and making meaning of what is read. This view of reading was applied to L1 reading around 1970 but it was only around 1979 that it started having an impact on L2 situation. Since then much has been written on techniques and methods of teaching reading in ESL (Nuttall, 2005; Mikulecky, 2008; Grabe, 2009).

But despite this, in many ESL classrooms reading continues to be done in the old traditional way: in the elementary classes the attempt is to help students to ‘learn to read’ and in secondary classes the focus is on ‘giving’ meaning and on ‘testing the product’ by asking comprehension questions given at the end of the prescribed text. This practice is content-oriented and not skill-oriented. The focus is on the ‘product’ and not on the ‘process’ of reading. In other words, the aim is to ‘give meaning’ to the learner instead of ‘skills’ required to ‘make meaning’ for him/herself.

Even where recent research on interactive models has reached the classroom teacher, it has not yet been assimilated in its right perspective. Teaching of reading has either not changed at all or tilted towards the top-down model. As Eskey (1988, p.95) observes, “despite the emergence of interactive models, much of the ESL reading literature continues to exhibit a strongly top-down bias.” The materials prescribed for intensive reading practice is of little help to the practising teacher.

### **How Can Material Writers Help**

In such ESL/EFL situations where teachers still use old, traditional practices or where there is a bias towards ‘top-down’ process of reading, the role of material writers assumes great significance in helping teachers impart skills and strategies used by effective readers identified as follows:

#### **a) Reading with a purpose**

Effective readers read with a purpose in mind. They are clear why they are reading a given text; what they will have to do after reading it: answer some given questions? Fill in some table/chart? Having a purpose in mind also gives learners motivation to read.

#### **b) Pre-viewing skills**

Trained readers survey the text to form a quick general idea of what the text is about by:

- using the title, sub-titles, pictures, diagrams and physical layout of the text;
- predicting and forming a hypothesis using prior background knowledge;
- testing the hypothesis by further reading of the text and reforming it if not proved correct; and
- recognising the text type and the writer’s purpose.

#### **c) Text sampling**

Trained readers skim for main ideas by going through the text silently and fast without stopping even when they come across a word or phrase they do not know, making sense of such words and phrases by guessing their meaning from the context, form, etc.

Other important traits of effective readers are:

#### **d) Recognizing Text structure**

- Recognizing rhetorical organisation of the text as a whole and its layout: whether it is classification, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, hypothesis to proof, etc.
- Understanding the organisation of each paragraph, identifying focal and support acts, and the function of support acts, that is, how they are related to the focal sentence. Are they meant to expand, explain, exemplify, restate, justify, and so on, the main idea contained in the focal sentence? In other words, they have the ability to spot the sentence containing the main idea, and the sentences, if any, used to develop the main idea, and how this development is achieved. They are also able to spot transitional sentence(s), if any, and the concluding sentences, and how these are indicated.

#### **e) Comprehensive reading**

Scanning/re-reading the text but this time slowly and attentively paying attention to details focusing on meaning by:

- reading in sense groups/meaningful chunks;
- making inferences;
- interacting with the writer through the text, critically examining the incoming information and accommodating the new information;
- identifying the writer's point of view, tone, etc.; and
- distinguishing facts from opinions.

Various methods and techniques have been

suggested for teaching effective reading skills to ESL/EFL learners. Among these, Carrell (1988: 248), who tries to bring out the common features of these methods, still remains the most popular for guiding classroom teachers. All these methods, it is pointed out, train the learner to *do* something *before* reading the text in order to activate appropriate background knowledge. In addition, all these methods have the reader read the text against the background of the activated knowledge. Finally, they all have the reader *do* something *after* reading to synthesize the new information gained from the text with their prior knowledge. These are popularly called *pre-reading*, *while-reading* and *post-reading* activities.

#### **Pre-reading Activities**

Reading with a purpose and pre-viewing texts can be taught through devising pre-reading activities. Material writers can frame tasks and activities to develop these skills and strategies. Tasks can also be framed to give background knowledge (linguistic, conceptual, subject and topic knowledge, and socio-cultural knowledge), if the learner does not have this knowledge, or to activate this knowledge if the learner already has it. These tasks should be stated before the learners start reading the text so that they read the given text with a purpose in mind and in the light of the background knowledge required to comprehend the text.

#### **Some Examples:**

1. Go through the given text silently and as fast as you can. Do not stop even if you come across a word or a phrase you do not know. After you have finished reading, answer the following questions:

- a) Tick a suitable title for this text out of the four given titles. OR
- b) You are given two titles. Which of these you think fits the text? OR
- c) Suggest a suitable title for this text. OR ...

### While-reading activities

Understanding text structure and comprehensive reading (skimming and scanning) can be taught by material writers through carefully devised tasks and activities.

#### Some Examples:

1. Underline the sentence(s) and/or phrase(s) that contain the main idea in each paragraph.
2. Now look at the remaining sentences in each paragraph. Are they related to the parts you have underlined? If so, how (i.e., are they restatements, expansions, explications, modifications, justifications, etc.)?
3. What is the rhetorical organisation of the text you have just read? (i.e., is it classification? comparison and contrast? cause and effect? problem to solution type? etc.).
4. The following types of exercise are useful for teaching text-structure: Re-arranging jumbled words/sentences/paragraphs; matching opening sentences with the paragraphs; picking out words/sentences that do not fit in the text; supplying linking devices/discourse-markers/organising devices, or choosing them from the given list; etc.

#### Scanning: Some Examples

Read the given text once again and:

- a) Think of suitable sub-titles for *each* paragraph. OR
- b) For each paragraph tick the most suitable sub-title out of those suggested (Give 3 sub-titles for each paragraph for learners to choose from). OR
- c) In which paragraph does the author say the following: . . . ? (Give the learners statements for matching with each paragraph.)

### C. Post-reading

1. Make notes for future reference; draw a diagram or flow-chart of the text to show how the text is organised (i.e. transfer verbal information into non-verbal form and vice-versa).
2. Rewrite using a different rhetorical structure.
3. Describe what the author's intention is: To inform? To persuade? To warn? Any other?
4. Students can be asked to make notes on the text they have read for reference in future.

The examples given above are only indicative and not exhaustive. Teachers can frame more tasks of their own depending upon their situation and level of competence of their learners.

Exercises, tasks and activities can also be devised to develop sensitivity to language: raise awareness about orthographic practices followed in written texts (such as capital letters, italics, quotations, and so on), ability to pick out words and expressions used to lend ironic effect or humour; understand tone and attitude; to give familiarity with devices

like metaphors and similes; distinguish between facts and opinions; etc. Writers also very often incorporate in their writing non-verbal information for effective communication. These can be graphs, charts, pictures or other visual media. Learners must be trained to make use of this non-text information to make meaning of what they read. The text can finally be used for teaching other useful language skills, e.g. grammar rules or items difficult for second/foreign language learners; consulting a dictionary for pronunciation or word meanings; and for preparing students for writing a paragraph, an essay, or a critical article depending on students' level of competence.

These activities and tasks have given rise to what is called holistic view of language teaching. Holistic language teaching devises exercises and classroom procedures to teach all the four skills of the target language including study skills and this has to be one of the aims of those writing intensive reading texts for ESL/EFL teaching situations we have described here.

**Note:**

1. This article is a sequel to the author's article, "Interactive Approaches to Second/ Foreign Language Reading and their Implications", *Language and Language Teaching*, 4(1), Issue 7 (Jan. 2015), pp.41-45.

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**Prof. S C Sood**, Retd. Professor of English, Dyal Singh College, Delhi University; Life Member, Shakespeare Society of India & Indian Association for English Studies.

**Email:** [scsood@rediffmail.com](mailto:scsood@rediffmail.com)

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