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EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES FOR DEVELOPING READING SKILLS IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: This article examines the techniques that help learners of English as a foreign language become confident, independent and strategic readers. Reading is treated here not as a passive decoding of printed words but as an active process in which the reader constructs meaning by combining linguistic knowledge with prior experience. The paper reviews the theoretical foundations of reading instruction, describes pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities, and discusses skimming, scanning, intensive and extensive reading, the SQ3R method, graphic organizers and reciprocal teaching. Particular attention is paid to the organization of a reading lesson and to practical recommendations that teachers can apply in secondary schools and universities.

Keywords: reading skills, reading strategies, skimming, scanning, extensive reading, schema theory, reciprocal teaching, EFL methodology.

1. Introduction

Among the four language skills, reading occupies a special place in the learning of English. For many students, especially those who live outside English-speaking countries, printed and digital texts are the main and most accessible source of authentic language. Through reading, learners meet new vocabulary in context, observe how grammar functions in real communication and gain access to academic, professional and cultural information. Consequently, the ability to read efficiently influences success not only in language classes but also in higher education and future careers.

Nevertheless, classroom practice often reduces reading to translating a passage sentence by sentence and answering a few factual questions. Such an approach trains patience rather than comprehension: students become dependent on dictionaries, lose the overall message of the text and rarely develop the habit of reading for pleasure. The purpose of this article is therefore to outline a set of techniques that shift the focus from word-by-word decoding to purposeful, strategic reading and to show how these techniques can be combined within a coherent lesson.

2. Theoretical Background

Modern approaches to reading instruction rest on the idea that comprehension results from the interaction between the text and the reader. Researchers usually distinguish three models of this process. Bottom-up models describe reading as a gradual movement from letters to words, from words to sentences and finally to the meaning of the whole text. Top-down models, in contrast, emphasize the reader's expectations, background knowledge and ability to predict content. Interactive models, which are most widely accepted today, argue that skilled readers use both kinds of processing at the same time, switching between them according to the difficulty of the material.

Schema theory offers a useful explanation of why background knowledge matters so much. According to this theory, information is stored in memory in organized structures, or schemata, which are activated when the reader encounters a familiar topic. When a learner lacks the relevant

schema, even a linguistically simple text may remain unclear; when the schema is activated beforehand, comprehension becomes faster and deeper. Carrell and Eisterhold pointed out that many difficulties of foreign-language readers are caused not by vocabulary alone but by missing cultural and content knowledge. For the teacher, this means that preparing students for a text is as important as working with the text itself.

Another important concept is the distinction between reading skills and reading strategies. Skills are largely automatic abilities, such as recognizing words quickly or identifying the main idea. Strategies are conscious actions that a reader chooses in order to solve a comprehension problem, for example rereading a difficult paragraph, guessing a word from context or summarizing a section in one's own words. Effective instruction makes these strategies visible, explains when to use them and provides enough practice for them to gradually become automatic.

3. Core Techniques for Developing Reading Skills

Pre-reading activation. Before students open the text, the teacher can ask them to look at the title, pictures or headings and predict what the passage will be about. Short discussions, brainstorming, quick questionnaires or a list of key words also help to activate existing knowledge and create a personal reason for reading. Prediction is valuable because readers who have formed expectations read more attentively in order to confirm or reject them.

Skimming. Skimming means reading quickly to grasp the general idea of a text. Learners are taught to focus on the introduction, the first sentence of each paragraph and the conclusion while ignoring details. A typical task is to give students one or two minutes to read an article and then choose the most suitable title from several options. Regular practice of this kind reduces the habit of stopping at every unknown word.

Scanning. Scanning is used to locate specific information, such as a date, a name, a figure or a definition. The reader moves the eyes rapidly across the page, looking only for the required item. Timetables, advertisements, menus and short news items are convenient materials for scanning activities, and a competitive element, for example a time limit, usually increases students' motivation.

Intensive reading. Intensive reading involves careful work with a relatively short text in order to understand it in detail. At this stage students analyze the logical structure of paragraphs, identify linking words, examine the meaning of new vocabulary and pay attention to grammatical forms. Intensive reading is especially useful for academic texts, where precise understanding of arguments and terminology is required.

Extensive reading. Extensive reading, as described by Day and Bamford, encourages learners to read large quantities of easy and interesting material for general understanding and enjoyment. Graded readers, short stories, blogs and news written for learners are typical resources. Students choose books themselves, read at their own pace and are not tested on every detail. Krashen argues that such voluntary reading contributes significantly to vocabulary growth, spelling, grammar and writing competence, because learners receive a large amount of comprehensible input.

Guessing meaning from context. Instead of turning to a dictionary immediately, learners should be trained to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words using clues in the sentence: definitions, examples, synonyms, contrasts and word-formation elements such as prefixes and suffixes. This strategy saves time, keeps attention on the message and builds confidence in dealing with authentic texts.

The SQ3R method. Proposed by Robinson, this method organizes study reading into five steps: Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review. Students first survey the text, then turn headings into questions, read to find answers, recite the main points without looking at the text and finally review the material. The method is particularly suitable for university students who work with textbooks and scholarly articles.

Graphic organizers. Mind maps, tables, timelines, flow charts and Venn diagrams help learners visualize the structure of a text and the relationships between ideas. Completing a graphic organizer during or after reading requires students to select essential information, which supports both comprehension and later recall.

Reciprocal teaching. Developed by Palincsar and Brown, reciprocal teaching is a cooperative technique in which small groups practice four strategies: predicting, questioning, clarifying and summarizing. At first the teacher models each strategy; later students take turns leading the discussion. This technique develops metacognitive awareness, since learners constantly monitor whether they have understood the text.

4. Stages of a Reading Lesson

The techniques described above are most effective when they are integrated into a clear lesson framework. In communicative methodology a reading lesson is usually divided into three stages, each with its own aims and typical activities. Table 1 summarizes this framework.

Table 1. Stages of a reading lesson and typical activities

Stage	Main aim	Typical activities
Pre-reading	Activate background knowledge, arouse interest, set a purpose for reading	Prediction from the title and pictures, brainstorming, pre-teaching key vocabulary, discussion questions
While-reading	Develop comprehension and reading strategies	Skimming for gist, scanning for details, true/false tasks, gap-filling, completing graphic organizers
Post-reading	Consolidate understanding and connect the text to other skills	Summaries, discussions, debates, role plays, writing a response, project work

At the pre-reading stage the teacher's task is to prepare the ground rather than to explain the entire text in advance. Pre-teaching should be limited to a few words that are essential for understanding and cannot be guessed from context. The while-reading stage should move from general to specific understanding: students first read for gist and only then return to the text for detailed information. Finally, the post-reading stage transforms reading into a starting point for speaking and writing, so that the language and ideas of the text are used productively.

5. Practical Recommendations for Teachers

Experience shows that the choice of material strongly affects learners' progress. Texts should be slightly above the students' current level, yet not so difficult that they cause frustration.

Nuttall recommends paying attention to three criteria when selecting texts: suitability of content, exploitability for teaching purposes and readability. Topics connected with students' interests, future profession and everyday life make reading meaningful and increase motivation.

It is equally important to vary the purpose of reading from lesson to lesson. If every text is followed by the same set of comprehension questions, students quickly lose interest. Alternating tasks such as matching headings to paragraphs, ordering jumbled sections, comparing two opinions or transferring information into a chart keeps learners engaged and trains different sub-skills. Time limits for skimming and scanning tasks help students overcome slow, word-by-word reading.

Teachers should also explain strategies explicitly. A short demonstration in which the teacher "thinks aloud" while reading a paragraph shows students how an experienced reader predicts, notices difficulties and resolves them. After modelling, learners practice the same strategy in pairs and later independently. Reflection questions at the end of the lesson, for example "Which strategy helped you most today?", strengthen metacognitive awareness.

Digital technologies open additional opportunities. Online libraries of graded readers, news websites for learners and e-book platforms with built-in dictionaries make extensive reading accessible outside the classroom. Reading logs, short book reviews and class blogs allow the teacher to monitor independent reading without turning it into a formal test. At the same time, students need guidance in evaluating online sources and in reading on screen without losing concentration.

Finally, assessment of reading should reflect the aims of instruction. Alongside traditional tests, teachers can use portfolios, self-assessment checklists and observation of group work. Such forms of evaluation reward not only the correct answer but also the reader's ability to apply strategies consciously and to discuss the text critically.

6. Conclusion

Developing reading skills in English is a gradual process that requires both systematic practice and a thoughtful choice of techniques. The analysis presented in this article shows that learners progress most successfully when their background knowledge is activated before reading, when they are taught to read for different purposes and when strategies such as skimming, scanning, guessing from context and summarizing are demonstrated and practiced explicitly. Combining intensive work on short texts with regular extensive reading helps students build vocabulary, fluency and confidence. A well-structured lesson with pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading stages turns reading into an active, communicative experience and prepares learners to work independently with authentic English texts in their studies and future professional life.

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