

Enhancing EFL Learners' Reading Skills through Effective Teaching Techniques

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ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى تقليص الهوة فيما بين مختلف طرائق القراءة و قدرات متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على معالجة و فهم نصوص القراءة على الوجه السليم. والغاية من وراء هذه الفكرة هو إدخال بعض تقنيات القراءة والنشاطات الرامية إلى تعزيز مهارات وكفاءات المتعلمين. ومن خلال معالجة هذه التقنيات، يفسر هذا المقال فاعلية مراحل القراءة الثلاثة في تعزيز فهم المتعلمين للنصوص. وتمثل هذه المراحل في مرحلة ما قبل القراءة ومرحلة أثناء القراءة ومرحلة ما بعد القراءة. المراحل الثلاثة تكمل بعضها البعض. الكلمات المفتاحية: طرائق القراءة، مهارات القراءة، مراحل القراءة، الفهم.

Abstract

This article attempts to bridge the gap between the different reading methods and EFL learners' potentialities to process and comprehend reading materials appropriately. The rationale behind this idea is to introduce some reading techniques and activities that promote this skill and improve learners' proficiency. Dealing with these techniques, the present article would explain the effectiveness of the three reading stages in fostering learners' comprehension of texts. These stages are pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. The three stages complement each other.

Keywords: *Comprehension, Reading Approaches, Reading Skills, Reading Stages, Understanding.*

Résumé

Le présent article vise à combler l'écart entre les différentes méthodes de lecture et les capacités des apprenants de l'Anglais comme langue étrangère (EFL) à traiter et à comprendre les textes de lecture de manière appropriée. La raison derrière cette idée est d'introduire certaines techniques de lecture et des activités visant à

promouvoir une telle compétence et améliorer les capacités des apprenants. En adoptant de telles techniques, le présent article expliquera l'efficacité des trois étapes de lecture dans la stimulation de la compréhension des textes par les apprenants. Ces étapes sont : la prélecture, au cours de lecture et après lecture. Les trois étapes se complètent.

Mots-clés : compréhension, méthodes de lecture, techniques de lecture, étapes de lecture, compréhension.

Introduction

Teaching reading in EFL classes has usually been at the center of debates among teachers and researchers. In this vein, the present article attempts to define 'reading' as a communicative process by following certain descriptive frameworks in this area. Various approaches for teaching the reading skill have been proposed. These were based upon different theories put forward to account for language acquisition and language learning. Yet, though this diversity of theoretical views, all reading approaches provide strategies and techniques to achieve full and appropriate comprehension of texts. For this sake, three main models are being introduced to explain the nature of foreign learning to read: bottom-up model, top-down model, and interactive model. Some reading techniques and stages are further discussed in this article to make EFL learners more aware of what is involved in reading a text and explain how the different pre-, while-, and post- reading stages within EFL classes may contribute in the promotion of learners' understanding.

Definition of Reading

Reading is a complex cognitive process, and the reason for reading depends very much on the purpose for reading. This process is an interaction between the reader and the text which depends on the writer's input and the reader's output, that is, comprehension. Yet, different definitions have been provided and various points have been raised to explain the nature of reading.

The Longman dictionary (2002) defines the concept 'reading' as:

The processes by which the meaning of a written text is understood. When this is done silently it is known as silent reading Reading employs many different cognitive skills, including letter and word recognition, knowledge of syntax and recognition of text types and text structure. (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 483)

Widdowson (1979) views reading as:

Not simply a matter of extracting information from the text. Rather, it is one in which the reading activates a range of knowledge with the reader's mind that... may be refined and extended by the new information supplied by the text. (Ibid, p. 56)

Widdowson describes here reading as a kind of interaction between the reader and the text. He further emphasizes the schematic knowledge or the pre-existed knowledge in the reader's mind that helps in the process of reading.

Alderson (2000) defines reading as: "...an enjoyable, intense, private activity, from which much pleasure can be derived, and in which one can become totally absorbed." (Ibid, p. 28) Within this context, Alderson asserts that reading is an enjoyable private activity from which readers can gain much pleasure and satisfaction.

Usually the main aim of reading is to understand a given written text. Grellet (1981) explains that reading comprehension means understanding a written text, and being able to extract the required information from it as efficiently as possible. This explains the significance of teaching reading comprehension.

Reading Comprehension

Comprehension is one of the major elements of reading, thus teaching reading comprehension represents an important part of any classroom reading program. It requires motivation, mental frameworks for holding

ideas, concentration and good study techniques. Without adequate reading comprehension skills, EFL learners may face a variety of issues to understand the main information contained in a text. Teachers are then supposed to help learners derive meaning and understanding from what they read. To teach learners strategies and techniques that enable them manipulate and process a reading passage to attain appropriate understanding and full comprehension of texts, teachers are expected to master the different approaches to reading, and must be aware of specific strategies and techniques that have proven effective in developing learners' comprehension.

Reading Comprehension Approaches

Throughout the history of developing skills different approaches to reading have been set for different goals of reading instruction. Thus, teachers may choose among various methods and techniques the ones that are likely to promote and improve learners' proficiency. The main approaches mentioned in reading research are the bottom-up approach, top-down approach, and interactive approach.

Bottom-up Approach

The bottom-up reading approach is a reading model that emphasizes the written or printed text, and proceeds from part to whole. Emerald Dechant (1991) claims:

Bottom-up models operate on the principle that the written text is hierarchically organized and that the reader first processes the smallest linguistic unit, gradually compiling the smaller units to decipher and comprehend the higher units. (Ibid)

This reveals that learners need to decode written words and then proceed to sentence, paragraph and text-level processing. That is, the reader relates letters to sounds then combines letters to recognize words then combines words to form sentences and finally paragraphs to comprehend messages

(texts). This model is also called data-driven. (Silberstein, 1994; Celce-Murcia & Opshtain, 2000).

Top-down Approach

Unlike the bottom-up approach that focuses on language elements such as grammar, vocabulary and cohesion, the top-down approach includes a focus on the reader's background knowledge and experience. Nunan (1993) defines it as schemata: "*past experiences which lead to the creation of mental frameworks that help us make sense of new experiences.*"

Within this context, this model enables learners to process and comprehend a written discourse thanks to their previous knowledge. Proponents of this model Goodman. K.(1985) and Smith. F. (1994) assert that comprehension is the basis for decoding skills, not a singular result, and meaning is brought to print, not derived from print. They further argue that readers identify letters and words only to confirm their assumptions about the meaning of the text. This implies that understanding a text is related to the reader's hypotheses which will be either confirmed or revised in the course of reading.

Interactive Approach

The interactive Approach or model attempts to combine the strong features of both bottom-up and top-down models, making it one of the most promising approaches to reading today. Proponents of this approach believe that reading is at once a perceptual and a cognitive process. Rumelhart D. (1985) states:

Reading is at once a perceptual and a cognitive process... a skilled reader must be able to make use of sensory, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic information to accomplish the task. These various sources of information appear to interact in many complex ways during the process of reading. (Ibid, 1985)

For Rumelhart, a skilled reader needs to master the different elements of a written text and use his/ her background knowledge to achieve the task and

attain appropriate comprehension. Hedge (2000) further asserts that second language reading requires an interactive model, combining both types of processing, bottom-up and top-down to make sense of a text.

Reading Techniques and Activities

Most researches on reading now focus on the effective reading strategies that promote learners' comprehension. For educationists and teachers, an effective reading strategy is a well-organized plan that consists of the set of activities, techniques, and procedures to be used in class in order to attain highly determined objectives, that is, understanding, comprehending and succeeding. It is the teachers' responsibilities to motivate reading by selecting appropriate materials and using effective techniques to achieve full comprehension of a written discourse.

Carrel and Eisterhold (1983) argue that the Language Experience Approach (LEA) proposed by Rigg in 1981 is an excellent way to control vocabulary, structure, and content. The basic LEA technique uses the learners' ideas and own words in the preparation of beginning reading materials. The learners decide what they want to say and how to say it, and then dictate to the teacher. This technique works because it enables learners to read what they have just said. The learners, in effect, write their own texts, neutralizing problems of unfamiliar content. Another way to minimize difficulties that face EFL learners while reading is to encourage narrow reading, as suggested by Krashen. Narrow reading implies exposing readers to a single topic or to the texts of a single author. Krashen suggests that narrow reading is more efficient for second language acquisition. Contemporary reading tasks, involve three phase procedures: pre -, while -, and post- reading stages.

Pre-reading Stage

The pre-reading stage helps in activating the learners' schema by enabling them recognize the knowledge that they already have about the topic of a text through discussion of titles, subheadings, photographs, identifying text

structure, etc. Such activities are called ‘pre – reading strategies’. Zhang (1993) asserts that “*comprehension is facilitated by explicitly introducing schemata through pre – reading activities*”. (Ibid, p. 5)

To ensure a good preparation for the reading activity, learners are expected to hold a minimum knowledge of the topic to be discussed. That is why a class discussion around the reading text ought to be held before engaging in reading. The questions asked, within this stage, are meant to activate and refresh or build the learners’ schemata through questioning and brainstorming. Maximum data about the literary text ought to be discussed for they are important for the understanding of the reading text major themes. Apart from being familiarized with the corpus, this stage strikes learners’ interest and motivation for the reading process because building a mental model of the text entails learners’ engaging in critical reading and checking within the text’s textual sphere itself. For this, the teacher may either set an assignment with respect to this objective or just discuss the matter with his/her learners as a pre-reading activity. The aim of course is always building or activating the relevant schemata.

The next step in getting the learners’ ready for the reading process is by forming or activating their schemata of literary genres. Within this step, the teacher may introduce the reading text, laying the focus on its main literary peculiarities; use of repetitions, broken grammar rules, imagery, etc.

The use of the title and cover book is an adequate activity for such stage. In fact, it is a brain storming exercise in which any kind of interpretation is welcomed, as some inquiries need not be answered, they are meant to prompt and raise learners’ interest as to look for their answers in the text.

While-reading Stage

The while-reading stage (or interactive process) enables learners to reformulate the text’s information by answering purposeful questions. These questions are usually direct and inference ones. They prompt learners scan the text looking for detailed information. Such activities help learners

interact with the author's message and thus confirm their understanding. According to King (2007),

Writers generally leave some material implicit in their text as they assume that the reader will easily figure out (infer) from the text. This "figuring out" of implicit information is called inferencing and is considered to be a central of the comprehension process. (Ibid, p. 269)

King asserts, here, that inferencing is a very important and useful strategy to comprehension. It permits the reader to retrieve the intended information by using what is mentioned in the text such as syntax, logical and cultural clues, etc. In general, the main objective of this stage is to develop learners' abilities in tackling texts by developing their linguistic and schematic knowledge.

Post-reading Stage

Within this stage, learners are asked to summarize what they have been reading and formulate personal impressions about the writer's message and ideas. Such tasks are usually assigned to enhance learners' personal responses through extending their ideas and knowledge. In studies conducted by some researchers like Trabasso and Bouchard (2000), it has been found that summarization training has led learners to better summarizing of reading texts, which reflects better texts comprehension (Grabe, 2009). Haller (2000) designed a number of post-reading activities which foster learning comprehension through the use of matching exercises, cloze exercises, cut-up sentences, and comprehension questions.

Conclusion

In general, the present article has attempted to cover a general overview of the different approaches to reading as a whole, then introduce reading comprehension skill in particular. Different strategic reading stages (pre -, while -, post- reading stages) have been discussed to highlight their effectiveness in fostering learners' knowledge, strategies, and awareness

required to become successful readers. Yet, more techniques and activities could be developed by educationists and teachers in different levels from preliminary teaching programmers to highly advanced ones in order to improve and enhance EFL learners' reading abilities, making them proficient readers.

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