Teaching Reading Strategies to Students who Study Foreign Languages

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Abstract

This article describes methods that can be used for EFL classes to teach reading strategies. The objectives of the article are to help students understand the text structure of a particular genre, find the main idea in the text, learn new vocabulary and learn effective reading strategies to develop their reading comprehension.

In classroom interaction, a shift between teacher and learner focus is made to provide the teacher's support and guidance at earlier stages and gradually withdraw the teacher's focus to assist students in becoming more independent learners. As some students may be shy when speaking and afraid of making mistakes in front of the class or peers, whole class, groups, and pair discussion are implemented at the earlier stages to minimize their anxiety.

On completion of the program, the students are expected to be able to read and understand newspaper articles, on topics familiar to them, without depending on dictionaries. These

activities help the students to reflect on written texts critically and to progress from an intermediate to an advanced level of proficiency.

Keywords: Reading, Prediction, Skimming, Scanning, Brainstorming, Text, Passages, Comprehension

1. Introduction

This article describes a program that can be used for EFL classes to teach reading strategies. The objectives of the program are that the students should be able to understand the text structure of a particular genre, find the main idea in the text, learn new vocabulary and learn effective reading strategies to develop their reading comprehension.

In classroom interaction, a shift between teacher and learner focus is made to provide the teacher's support and guidance at earlier stages and gradually withdraw the teacher's focus to assist students in becoming more independent learners. As some students may be shy when speaking and afraid of making mistakes in front of the class or peers, whole class, groups, and pair discussion are implemented at the earlier stages to minimize their anxiety.

1.1 Materials

Teaching materials used are articles from newspapers graded-down for non-native speakers. Texts printed on large sheets are used for whole class activities, and handouts are provided to the students for group, pair and independent activities.

2. Pre-reading Activities

2.1 Setting the Purpose of Reading (as a whole class)

Firstly, the teacher clarifies the purpose of reading to the students. The purpose of reading is to get an overall idea of the text, to learn new information, to learn some vocabulary and to become familiar with the style of a news article. After that, the teacher introduces what kind of reading strategies are necessary for reading newspaper articles and achieving the above purpose; such as skimming, scanning, and close reading. This activity assists the students in selecting appropriate reading styles for a particular genre. These strategies also help the students to acquire skills to deal with unfamiliar vocabulary without depending on dictionaries.

2.2 Signpost Questions (as a whole class)

The teacher asks questions to motivate the readers and activate their background knowledge.

- How do you come/go to work/school? (By bus, subway, train, bicycle, or on foot?)

- How long does it take to come/go to school/work? (Less than 30 minutes, one hour, or more?)

- What do you usually do on the bus, subway, or train? (Read books, sleep, listen to music or nothing?)

- What else can you do on the bus, or train? (Chat with other passengers, use a mobile phone, or something else?)

- Where do you study English? (At school, library, home, office, train or elsewhere?)

2.3 Prediction Activities (as a whole class)

The teacher shows only the title of the text (and photographs if available) at this stage, and asks the students to predict the topic based on the previous questions, prior knowledge, and the title of the text. Based on the learners' prediction, some questions will be asked by the teacher to focus on the main point when reading the text.

Questions such as these might be asked:

- What was the event?

- When did the event occur?

- Where did the event occur?

- Who was involved in the event?

- How did the event occur?

- Why did the event occur?

Then, the teacher asks the students to predict the style/tenor of language and the schematic structure of the text.

Questions such as these might be asked to identify and clarify textual information:

- Who wrote the text?

- Who was the text written for?

- What style of language might be used?

- How might the text be structured?

Active participation of the students is encouraged to draw on their background knowledge to assist reading comprehension. Therefore, to raise as many ideas as possible, the above three activities are conducted as a whole class. Oral interaction with the teacher and peers could assist reading as giving and sharing background knowledge.

2.4 *Skimming in Groups*

At this stage, the teacher shows the whole text printed on a large sheet put on a board to the students. Firstly, the teacher models skimming strategies to assist the readers.

After the modeling, the teacher asks the students some questions such as:

- What is the text about?

- How do we know about the topic of the text?

- What is the purpose of this type of text? (i.e. to provide information, to recount an event, to explain?).

- How the text is organized? (Identify major stages such as background events, sources).

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Next, the teacher asks the students to skim through the text and discuss the above questions in groups. The skimming strategies are introduced to get an overall picture and to ascertain the genre and field of the text. Discussion with peers and the teacher at this stage might provide general information about the topic and structure of the text, and the students might be able to predict further what the text is about.

2.5 Scanning (in groups)

Scanning activities are introduced to teach strategies of finding appropriate information in the text that would be necessary for successful reading comprehension. With this exercise, the students might be able to locate specific information about the topic of the text. To assist the scanning, the teacher asks the students to answer the questions designed at stage three of prediction activities, then, write down the responses on the board. Answering the previously designed questions confirm or disconfirm the readers' prediction.

2.6 Breaking up the Text (in groups)

The teacher provides handouts, which is the text broken up into each section, to each group and asks the students to summarize the texts in the groups. After finishing the summarizing of the texts, the students are encouraged to present their summaries to the other groups of students. This activity allows the students to analyze more detail in each section, obtain specific information more closely, combine information of the sections, and understand the main idea of the text. Moreover, reporting the summaries to the class provides the students opportunity to speak English.

Skimming, scanning, and breaking up the text are introduced as group activities to develop and confirm the readers' understanding further. Reading strategies and language use by the teacher and students who have higher proficiency in English might work as a model and suggest ways of using vocabulary, explaining, and classifying, comparing, exemplifying, questioning, and pronouncing words.

2.7 Brain Storming (as a whole class)

By conducting this process, the teacher is able to confirm the students' understanding by checking responses answered at the fifth stage and summaries reported at the sixth stage. If more ideas arise after summarizing each section, write these responses on the board.

2.8 Pre-teaching Important Words (as a whole class)

Before moving into actual reading activities, teaching new and important words for reading comprehension is necessary. The readers are able to prepare and acquire the new vocabulary or terminology which would be necessary to understand the text before tackling reading practice. Vocabulary items are categorized as those which could be or could not be guessed from the context, and essential or less important to understand the text. By introducing and explaining the above language features of the text, the students are able to expand and relate their current knowledge and gain new knowledge of the genre.

3. During Reading Activities

3.1 The Text (as a whole class)

This activity shows the students how the text is structured to achieve its genre. At this stage, the teacher guides the class in discussing the feature of the text; the genre of the text (recount of an event in the newspaper article), the social purpose (to inform readers about events which are considered newsworthy and interesting), schematic structure and language features of the genre.

- **Headline:** explains the story in a short telegraphic way.

- **Newsworthy events:** describes the events in summary form.

- **Background event:** recounts what happened, in what circumstance by expert.

- **Sources:** introduces comments on the events by authorities.

- **Background event:** elaborates what happened, to whom and in what circumstances.

Finally, the teacher informs the students that language features typical of the genre are as follows:

- Material processes in past tense are employed to retell what happened in the past.

- Verbal processes are used to project the comment by expert in sources stage.

- Many circumstances are applied to tell when, where, and how the events happened.

By introducing and explaining the above language features of the text, the students are able to expand and relate their current knowledge and gain new knowledge of the genre.

3.2 Stop and Think (in pairs)

After the modeling, the teacher asks the students to read the text in pairs. In each paragraph, the students are encouraged to talk and discuss what they have just read, paraphrase it, identify the main ideas, and generate questions in pairs. This activity offers the students more opportunities to practice listening, speaking, and helps them to activate background knowledge and relate it to the new information, and confirm their understanding of the text.

3.3 Reciprocal Teaching (as a whole class)

At this stage, the whole class has a discussion to generate questions, make summaries, predict and clarify the text. This is to clarify the purpose of reading, direct attention, activate background knowledge again, and also to evaluate content, monitor predictions, and draw conclusions. The teacher is able to monitor the students' performance and confirm whether the students are able to use new vocabulary, express ideas and concepts and link ideas.

3.4 Finding the Main Idea (as a whole class)

The teacher asks the students to find the main idea in a paragraph or whole text. This activity is to identify and distinguish the important information from the less important information in the

text, summarize the concepts, confirm the understanding of the content, and as a review of the previous activities. The students are able to avoid misunderstandings about the topic by sharing the idea with peers.

3.5 Signal Words (as a whole class)

Signal words used to indicate a particular text pattern are taught to show how these words function in the text. For instance, 'so' indicates a cause and effect, and 'after' indicates sequence of events in the text. Teaching these words and the function might give the readers new or different ideas to approach the text.

3.6 Key Words (as a whole class)

The teacher asks the students to identify key words to distinguish the important words from the less important words in the text.

The students are asked to identify the words by asking:

- What was the event?

- When did the event occur?

- Where did the event occur?

- Who was involved in the event?

- How did the event occur?

- Why did the event occur?

3.7 Developing Data Banks (as a whole class)

Words and discourse markers which are useful, important and frequently appear should be added to individual or class data banks to assist the students' vocabulary development. Writing these words on a sheet on the wall or students' notebooks assists the students' reading practices in future classroom activities.

4. Post-reading Activities

4.1 Cloze Passages (as a whole class)

This activity is designed to assist the readers in developing vocabulary, understanding cohesion in the text, and investigating the text further. Reading abilities might be improved by identifying chains in the text and recognizing how the chains are used to make the text coherent. Showing how the teacher or the readers who have higher proficiency complete the passage works as a model of good reading strategies and assists the learners who have difficulties in reading comprehension to deepen and expand knowledge of the context.

4.2 Comprehension Questions (individual)

Comprehension questions are asked to the students to confirm their understanding of the content of the whole text and to monitor the understanding of each student. Question sheets containing various questions are provided for each student to work on individually.

4.2.1 True or False Questions

- Computer training is offered on the trains. True or False?

- The training is offered on morning trains. True or False?

- The trains run from Houston. True or False?

4.2.2 Alternative Questions

- Was the first lesson on March 26 or March 30?

- Was the first lesson English or Russian?

- Was the first lesson a successful or not successful?

4.2.3 WH-questions

- Who is taking the training?

- How many students signed up for the lessons?

- How many languages are taught on the trains?

- What languages are taught on the trains?

- What does the teacher have to do before the lesson?

- What do the students have to do before the lesson?

- What is difficult to do on the trains?

- What happened on the first day of the lessons?

- Where is Denmark?

- Why are the lessons given on the trains?

After the students complete the activity, the teacher checks their answers with the class to confirm their understanding of the context before moving onto the next activity.

Information collected at the stage is used not only to find the learners' language proficiency but also to present evidence of their advancement to various stakeholders. The teacher is able to improve the curriculum by using the information collected at the stage in the future course.

4.3 Compare Ideas (in pairs)

Charts are provided to the students to ask questions to his/her partner and fill in their answers. By questioning, conferencing and sharing their ideas with peers, the students are

able to practice listening, speaking and writing, relate personal experiences with the topic, and focus on their ideas before the final discussion stage.

Questions	You	Your partner
What kind of transportation do you usually use?	Bus, train, bicycle	Subway
What time do you usually travel on trains/subways/buses?	7:30, 12:15	2:30, 4:30
What do you usually do on trains/subways/ buses?	Sleep, read	Listen to music, talk to other people
Do you want to study language on trains? Why?	No	Yes
Do you think language training on trains is a good idea? Why?	No because you don't learn it properly	Yes because you practice oral communication
What kind of lessons can we offer other than language? Why?	Orientation classes	Tour guide
What else can we do on trains? Why?	Listen to music because it's a nice way to spend your time	Talk to foreigners because you practice foreign languages, body language and gestures
Do you want to take lessons on trains? Why?	No because it is boring	Yes because you make good use of your time

4.4 Discussion (as a whole class)

Discussing about the topic helps the readers to relate the theme of the text to their experience and develop their understanding. Questions such as the following are designed to lead the discussion in the class.

- Do you want to study language on trains? Why?

- Do you think language training on trains is a good idea? Why?

- What kind of lessons can we offer other than language? Why?

- What else can we do on trains? Why?

- Do you want to take lessons on trains? Why?

The answers are not in the text; therefore, the students have to think of their own idea about the topic.

5. Conclusions

On completion of the program, the students are expected to be able to read and understand newspaper articles, on topics familiar to them, without depending on dictionaries. These activities help the students to reflect on written texts critically and to progress from an intermediate to an advanced level of proficiency. Studying reading has an obvious practical payoff in terms of education. It is also a good place to be doing psychological science. Reading is a well-delineated behavior, at least by comparison with many other domains, and hence it offers prospects for real progress.

The hope is that what we learn affords a platform for offering clear and credible guidance to educators charged with teaching children to become skilled readers and with rescuing children who falter on the way.

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