Using Pre-Reading Strategies with EFL Students to Facilitate Successful Reading Comprehension

Iskra Stamenkoska MA [i], FON University – Skopje, Macedonia

Abstract: Reading takes a prominent role in any ESL classroom. However, since 'the reading process is essentially unobservable' (Singhal 1998), it is paramount that the teacher is fully aware of what happens when students interact with a text. Furthermore, reading has been described as 'an active and a selective process' (Nuttall 1996: 5) where readers bring their prior knowledge, also known as schema. Researchers have created numerous strategies and activities that aid its activation. It is, therefore, worth exploring which strategies are more useful than others. This paper looks into three different strategies which are part of the pre-reading stage of intensive reading activities, as well as the most salient teaching problems in teaching reading.
.

Keywords: reading comprehension, pre-reading, schemata activation, reading strategies

Apstrakt: Čitanje ima važnu ulogu u bilo kojoj učionici gde se uči engleski kao strani jezik. Međutim, pošto se "proces čitanja u suštini ne može posmatrati" (Singhal 1998), najvažnije je da je nastavnik potpuno svestan toga šta se dešava kada učenici imaju interakciju sa tekstom. Štaviše, čitanje se opisuje kao "aktivan i selektivan proces" (Nuttall 1996: 5) u koji čitaoci unose svoje prethodno znanje, takođe poznato kao šema. Istraživači su stvorili brojne strategije i aktivnosti koje pomažu njeno aktiviranje. Stoga je vredno istražiti koje su strategije korisnije od drugih. U ovom radu razmatraju se tri različite strategije koje su deo pripremne faze pre započinjanja aktivnosti intenzivnog čitanja, kao i najizraženiji problemi u nastavi podučavanja čitanja.

Ključne reči: razumevanje pročitanog, priprema za čitanje, aktiviranje shema, strategije čitanja

1. READING IN L2

Reading has been studied for many years as a comprehension process and an essential skill in L2 learning. It greatly enhances a language learner's academic success, prospects of employment, mobility and global citizenship (Grabe & Stoller 2013). While in the past it was perceived as passive and receptive, the emergence of the psycholinguistic model of reading helped shift this view. Reading, it was noted, is 'a selective process. It involves partial use of available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected, or refined' (Goodman 1967:127). In other words,

reading has little to do with the information contained in a text. Readers approach the text with their prior experience and background knowledge on the topic, which they compare to the information presented in the text.

While there are significant similarities between the two, reading in L2 is different than reading in L1 in the way that it entails a plethora of factors, some of which are:

- Linguistic competencies in L2 - The proficiency level of the reader plays an important role in understanding a text. Students need to understand the vocabulary used in the text. Syntax, register and style matter, too.
- Background knowledge of the content (Nuttall, 1996: 156), i.e. knowledge of the topic. Imagine working with rather proficient students on a text about the future of science (neuroscience, technology, fertility). They need to know something about science before they read the text. So, the more the students know about the topic, the better they will understand the text.
- Cross-cultural factors - Wallace argues that 'culture-specific content can create problems for foreign and second language learners' (Wallace 1992: 107). This means that if a group of EFL students are to read a text about cricket, and they live in a country where the sport is not played at all, the teacher would need to make sure the students learn something about the sport before they interact with the text. Conversely, texts similar to the native culture will be more comprehensible.
- Purpose of reading - Texts are read in the EFL classroom for various purposes: to get the main idea, locate specific information, synthesize the information in a written summary, as a springboard for discussion, as context for a given structure which is to be subsequently analysed, etc. In order to make reading purposeful, the teacher must include a task, i.e. a specific activity, typically answering questions of various types.
- Reading ability in L1 - Carrell points to a high correlation between reading abilities in L1 and L2: readers who are familiar with formal schemata (formal, rhetorical and

organizational structure of a text) will bring this knowledge when reading in L2 (Carrell 1983: 83).

Identifying the differences and difficulties between reading in L1 and L2 has contributed to a new understanding of the reading process, which in turn has provided a better understanding of the process of learning to read. Such input is important for the development and writing of L2 materials. Teachers are equally interested in enhancing learners' L2 reading skills, which has opened an important avenue: exploring effective L2 reading strategies to help EFL learners overcome reading difficulties.

2. PURPOSE OF READING

Depending on the purpose, reading is classified into two categories: intensive and extensive. According to Thornbury, **intensive reading** "applies to the way short texts are subject to close and detailed classroom study. **Extensive reading**, on the other hand, means the more leisurely reading of longer texts, primarily for pleasure, or in order to accumulate vocabulary, or simply to develop sound habits of reading. This is typically done outside class" (Thornbury 2006: 191). In other words, the reading

comprehension activities that are usually done in class are intensive reading tasks.

Krashen has long ago acknowledged the importance of reading in the ESL curriculum (Krashen 2004). He points out that students who read different print media acquire meanings of words through context clues alone, which proves that reading is useful for language acquisition and vocabulary development. Extensive reading in the ESL classroom can and should be exploited to the maximum by encouraging students to focus on vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation. Longer, semantically integrated texts are particularly helpful as they demonstrate the way sentences, paragraphs, and whole texts are constructed (Harmer 2007). However, if the reading comprehension is a prelude to a meaningful study of structures, lexis or content, it is important the learners fully understand the text before such study takes place.

3. SCHEMA THEORY

What is needed for successful reading comprehension? Nuttall believes one of the requirements is 'shared certain assumptions about the world and how it works' (Nuttall 1996: 6). These assumptions, she says, depend on what we have experienced and how we have

organized this past experience. In psychology, this background knowledge is defined as **schema** (pl. **schemata**) (Bartlett 1932) and it helps construct the meaning in discourse. Nuttall builds on this explanation, adding that 'new experiences, including those derived from reading, change existing schemata' (Nuttall 1996: 8). This means that schema is a flexible, dynamic, ever-changing structure.

A crucial ingredient for successful reading comprehension is the amount of schemata the learner possesses. Relying on schemata to understand a text is part of the so-called **top-down** processing, i.e. 'using higher-level clues to make sense of a text' (Thornbury 2006:41). The opposite process is **bottom-up** and it involves "knowledge of words, including how they are spelt and pronounced, and knowledge of grammar" (Thornbury 2006: 41). In other words, students rely on linguistic knowledge to decode meaning. These two processes are intertwined, and successful readers utilize both. In fact, more proficient readers use a variety of reading strategies. Rather than relying only on linear bottom-up processing, successful readers resort to top-down reading strategies, such as previewing the text and allocating selective attention to the main point of the text (Sheorey & Mokhtari 2001).

Schemata activation is not necessarily a conscious process, and readers activate it: (a) when new information is assimilated into the existing one, so it expands or adjusts the schemata, or (b) when new information is used to build new schemata.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF PRE-READING STRATEGIES

Intensive reading activities are broken into three stages: pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading. Nowadays, a lot of attention is given to the pre-reading stage as it helps prepare the learners to read, which was not the case in the past, when the emphasis was put on the product (the text), and the reading process was overlooked. Back in the 1970s, Widdowson pointed out that 'most of the teaching encourages learners to believe that exact meanings can, in principle, be fully recoverable from texts… We thus discourage a normal use of natural language and deny learners access to their own conceptual world which alone ensures that reading will, in any really significant sense, be meaningful' (Widdowson 1979: 174). What this means is that teachers resorted to bottom-up processing, rather than exploiting students' background knowledge as well.

However, pre-reading tasks have now become a norm in the EFL classroom (Grabe & Stoller 2013) and a top-down look at a text seems to be the preferred approach.

5. SCHEMATA ACTIVATION AS PRE-READING

The teacher is of instrumental importance when developing learners' strategic competency in reading, as such strategies may be unknown to the learners. The teacher's role is to use activities in order to help students understand the text better. In other words, these strategies are student-centered and teacher-guided.

While there are numerous ways to activate students' schemata, three main strategies have been selected for this paper. The common denominator for all three is the predicting factor: they all engage students in hypothesizing, consciously or subconsciously, about the topic and help students build on what they already know.

Questioning is normally part of post-reading, but can work well as a pre-reading strategy. The purpose is not to test comprehension, but, as Nuttall suggests, 'to guide readers directing their attention to the important points in the text, preventing them from going off along a false track' (Nuttall 1996: 160). Students too can be involved in formulating questions, which makes for a more student-centered lesson.

Semantic mapping is part of word association- the teacher elicits as many ideas (keywords) from students, who later organize the information into so-called semantic maps, indicating how these words are related. Wallace certainly approves of this: 'ask students to brainstorm key concepts they associate with the topic' (Wallace 1992: 92). For example, in a Business English course, students can prepare semantic maps for the keyword 'marketing' and detail the relationships between the concepts before they read a text on that topic, thereby activating their knowledge on marketing. Also, maps are particularly adequate for visual learners.

Previewing is a common strategy, found in many course books today. It involves students guessing and hypothesizing about the text by looking at illustrations, pictures, headings, subheadings, etc. It may also include reading the first paragraph. For instance, with a group of upper-intermediate learners, the teacher used film stills from 'Sliding Doors' before they read several contrasting reviews of the film. It helped students guess the film genre.

6. COMMON LEARNING PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING

As pointed earlier in this paper, linguistic incompetence can inhibit comprehension: there are too many unfamiliar words. Polysemy is another issue that may cause problems. For instance, students may have developed a decent mental dictionary but are still struggling with multiple meanings of words. A text can be difficult if it is dense with long, complex sentences (subordinate sentences, embedded clauses, etc.), and nominalization. The most obvious solution here is to use the pre-reading stage to pre-teach some vocabulary. Semantic mapping as a strategy would be very helpful on this issue. Another approach is to convince students that 'ignoring new words is acceptable and necessary' (Nuttall 1996: 65). Nuttall's advice is applicable to complex sentences, especially when it comes to reading for gist. With more advanced levels, students are expected to develop learner autonomy, and pre-teaching vocabulary runs contrary to it.

On a similar note, just pre-teaching vocabulary does not entail comprehension. Teachers should pre-teach unfamiliar vocabulary crucial for understanding, but also work on bottom up strategies by guiding students to pay attention to the form of word (suffixes and prefixes), origin, surrounding context, etc. Bottom-up processing is important for detailed comprehension and accuracy in reading.

Another issue which inhibits reading is lack of background knowledge. This can seriously compromise comprehension. Learners of general English with little knowledge of astronomy would find a text on that topic quite challenging, even if the teacher pre-teaches key vocabulary.

The same applies to First (FCE) for Schools. Due to their age, students preparing for the exam have limited background knowledge and life experience. Here, schemata activation is paramount for reading comprehension. Techniques may vary, but the outcome is the same- students start thinking about the topic by using their life experiences and world knowledge. One possibility is to use the Questioning strategy. Personalized questions *(What do you think about…? Have you ever…?)* can be helpful for schemata activation. Candidates who are taking any of the standardized ESOL exams are advised to do some previewing. Despite the limited time to read a text, they are advised to look at headings, subheadings, track down key words, all for the sake of schemata activation.

Questioning is an effective strategy but may result in students focusing on the answers to only these questions. To avoid this, the teacher should devise gist questions pertaining to the conclusion of the text, rather than information in the opening paragraph.

EFL texts dense with cultural information are not uncommon in course books, and as previously mentioned, cross-cultural factors may pose challenges. For example, a group of very fluent B2 students who come from traditional Muslim families had troubles understanding a text on speed dating, as such thing does not exist in their sociocultural context. In such instances, Wallace suggests moving from the 'known to the unknown' (1992: 108), i.e. build on what students already know about the topic. Web-quests for pre-reading are excellent for adjusting old schemata or building new ones. Students can complete a webquest for homework and present on the findings in class, before interacting with the text. However, the potential problem with elaborating on cultural information is promoting stereotypes. This can be avoided by incorporating texts with different often conflicting stances on cross-cultural issues.

Further common teaching problem is when reading comprehension mirrors testing purposes and not teaching. Imagine this scenario: students have just read a long text on environmental problems and answered T/F questions. The teacher has skipped the pre-reading stage and feeds back only on whether the answers are correct or not. This strategy is suitable for a testing situation. In teaching, reading comprehension starts with a pre-reading activity. A good idea would be to have students speculate on the T/F questions first and then read and mark the questions appropriately.

Previewing can be blended with Questioning into one single activity through the use of KWL Charts, i.e. graphic organizers that help students organize information before, during and after a reading activity. They engage students in a new topic and activate prior knowledge, and help track what students know (K), want to know (W), and have learned (L) about a text. It is important to note that the pre-reading stage can sometimes be time-consuming, but when structured properly, it can be rewarding and facilitate comprehension. Skipping this stage in order to save time and devote more attention to post-reading tasks would be detrimental to learning.

Mixed ability is a common issue in virtually any classroom at any level. At the intermediate level, it is particularly visible,

as this is where the plateau effect starts. Strong students will read quickly and effectively, while poor readers will struggle. How can a teacher cater to all needs? A group pre-reading task prompts students of mixed abilities to collaborate, thereby fostering positive interdependence. *The Tea Party* (Beers 2002: 94) is a pre-reading activity based on previewing, where students consider parts of a text before reading it. The teacher takes actual phrases from the text and writes them on index cards. Students receive their cards and walk around the classroom, share their cards, listen to others, and discuss how the phrases on the cards might be connected, making inferences about the text. After this, they get into smaller groups to discuss what they have learned from the cards. They jointly prepare a short paragraph and present it in class. Next, they read the text to check their hypotheses. This not only sparks interest but also mirrors real-life communication and improves comprehension of the text.

Collaborative pre-reading tasks have some advantages over individual or pair work activities. Group work fosters positive interdependence, cooperative learning and learner autonomy. *Tea Party* may be time-consuming, but it has multiple benefits: successful schemata activation, blending of all four skills, group collaboration. A further benefit of group pre-reading tasks is authenticity. We often learn about interesting texts when we talk to others, which sparks our interest to read.

Attitude towards reading is often an issue, but it is more pronounced with adolescent learners. A student not interested in reading will probably not pay attention or bother to understand the text. This is yet another reason why pre-reading is important- it helps arouse interest in the topic. One solution here is to use the previewing strategy: use a picture associated with the text and add a provocative statement, such as *I hate going to school.* Next, get students to discuss how much they agree or disagree with it. A similar activity with smoking sparked a heated debate in one of the author's courses with adolescent learners.

Pictures seem to be very appealing to all learners. They are an easily accessible yet powerful resource which can aid comprehension and stimulate a solid pre-reading discussion. It is no wonder then that in most course books today, reading texts are always accompanied by a picture or illustration. In fact, in a study connected to listening rather than reading, a group of participants were shown an image connected to the text before hearing it. In the post-listening part, the participants had little difficulty understanding the story and

recalling it. On the other hand, those participants who were shown the image after hearing the text were unable to recall the story in as much detail as the previous group (Bransford & Johnson 1972).

7. CONCLUSION

Several aspects are crucial to understanding current thinking about reading. For one, it is a communicative activity with implies an interaction between the reader, the writer, and the text. This interaction is not necessarily an easy or straightforward one, and requires the students to negotiate the meaning with the author. Helping students understand the complexity of this interaction will in turn enable them to become better readers. Next, reading is a process, and the end-point is not only the number of correct answers scored in the reading comprehension task. The reading process starts with previewing the text and schemata activation. If proper attention is paid to the pre-reading stage, this will lead to increased motivation and much better understanding of the text.

References:

Bartlett, C. (1932). *Remembering*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Beers, K. (2003). *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Bransford, J. D., & Johnson, M. K. (1972). *Contextual prerequisites for understanding: Some investigations of comprehension and recall*. Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 11(6), 717-726.

Carrell, P. L. (1983). *Some Issues in Studying the Role of Schemata, or Background Knowledge, in Second Language Comprehension*. Reading in a Foreign Language, 1(2), 81-92.

Goodman, K. S. (1967). *Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game*. Literacy Research and Instruction, 6(4), 126-135.

Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2013). *Teaching and researching reading*. New York: Routledge.

Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2013). *Teaching and researching reading*. New York: Routledge.

Harmer, J. (2007). *The practice of English language teaching*. Pearson Longman Harlow

Krashen, S. D. (2004). *The power of reading: Insights from the research*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Nuttall, C. (1996). *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*. Heinemann, 361 Hanover Street, Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912.

Sheorey, R., & Mokhtari, K. (2001). *Differences in the metacognitive awareness of reading strategies among native and non-native readers*. System, 29(4), 431-449.

Singhal, M. (1998). *A Comparison of L1 and L2 Reading: Cultural Differences and Schema*. The Internet TESL Journal, 4(10), 4-10.

Thornbury, S. (2006). *An A–Z of ELT. A Dictionary of Terms and Concepts*. Macmillan Books for Teachers.

Wallace, C. (1992). *Reading. A Scheme for Teacher Education*. Language Teaching. Oxford University Press.

Widdowson. H. (1979). *Explorations in applied linguistics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[i] Corresponding author contact email: iskra_feb@yahoo.com