

READING WITHOUT TRANSLATION

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Reading a foreign language is too often confused with translation. This is not to denigrate translation which is undoubtedly an important skill. However, true mastery of reading involves acquisition of information and skills which are completely separate from those needed in translation.

What is reading then if it is not translation? Reading is the decoding of information from a discrete system of written symbols. This information is not accessible by a word-by-word analysis of each sentence. In fact such an analysis frequently obscures the message contained by the complex structure of words, sentences and paragraphs that comprise a piece of English prose or fiction.

Decoding is the extraction of information from the written page, a process which includes grammar and vocabulary as a tool, not as an end in itself. It involves for the native speaker a wide variety of skills ranging from the basic to the advanced.

Correct and efficient eye movements must also be employed. These eye movements may be problematic for second language learners especially as in Japanese, Chinese or Arabic where the normal pattern of eye movements differs.

The native speaker must also develop the ability to visually discriminate the symbols used by the written language and to associate those symbols with the sounds they represent. In print English letters are easily differentiated from each other once the alphabet has been learned, but the highly unphonetic nature of English presents a continual problem to the non-native speaker reader. The relationship of the written symbol, sound and meaning is crucial to reading and is not something that non-native speakers should be left to deal with by themselves.

Finally the reader must interpret, that is to digest and evaluate the information and implications contained within a reading and when necessary apply that information in problem solving activities. This is what advanced reading is really about and what is most ignored by a translation-based reading approach.

In the classroom on a day-to-day basis the teacher has a variety of tasks to do. First he or she must motivate the students through an introductory or prereading activity.

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These pre-reading activities can sometimes be extensive and time-consuming, but they are invaluable in focusing student attention and arousing interest in the reading. The teacher is in some ways a tour guide directing students where and how to look.

Teachers may sometimes have to introduce new vocabulary prior to reading before launching into the main reading task which should lead to partial or global comprehension.

When possible a follow-up activity reinforcing something learned during the reading should be included.

In teaching non-native speakers to read the teacher has an additional two-fold responsibility. The teacher must function as a source of information not otherwise accessible to the students and as a trainer for a variety of reading-based skills that facilitate interpretation and application of reading content.

Six basic categories of information exist. Students will need phonological (sound), morphological (word-construction) and syntactical (sentence construction) information from the beginning to the high-intermediate level. As the reading levels rise, the semantic (meaning), rhetorical (logical) and cultural (universal, comparative and specific) become increasingly important until they completely overshadow the more basic categories.

For example, a teacher of basic reading cannot assume students will know correct pausing, stress and reading speed. This kind of information must be both presented and practiced. However, the goal of this practice should not be to develop student oral reading but to allow students to envision during silent reading those portions of oral production relevant to interpretation.

For example students will not know that each word of the sentence "I will not go there!" is stressed and that this repeated stress indicates anger or some negative form of excitement.

In the same way students may need to be taught prefix, roots and suffix meanings. Knowing that "re" means again or that "dis" is negative will prepare students for some of the vocabulary acquisition techniques to be discussed later.

Concerning syntax the teacher will frequently have to explain problems which go beyond the normal content of student grammars. Tricky pronoun references such as when "it" appears several times in the same paragraph with multiple references will frequently need teacher explanation. So will connectives such as "therefore" and "consequently" which link ideas between sentences and paragraphs. Embedding, nominalization and inverted word order will also require explanation. However, the teacher should not

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attempt to become a grammar teacher. He should instead attempt to quickly clarify how the grammatical construct influences the meaning of the sentence or paragraph.

By the intermediate level, the semantic category is increasingly important, and teachers must begin to equip students with techniques that native speakers employ for efficient vocabulary acquisition.

Non-native and particularly non-Western students must be trained out of what is too often almost a religious dependence on the dictionary. The bilingual dictionaries which students use are simply not adequate for advanced reading materials. Furthermore, students must learn to differentiate between important and unimportant words if they are to read at a reasonable speed. Therefore, guessing techniques used by native speakers as a part of the reading process must be taught.

These vocabulary-in-context exercises train students to guess the meaning of words by using morphological, syntactical and situational clues. The guessing serves a variety of purposes. It allows the students to read without constantly interrupting their thoughts by opening their dictionaries. It encourages them to see a reading as a holistic segment, not a collection of words and sentences. It also allows students to read at a more rapid speed and to distinguish between important and unimportant words in a passage. Further, it prepares students for using a non-bilingual dictionary where the multiplicity of meaning makes guessing a requirement.

The process of guessing will seem strange to students at first. It will, however, become familiar with repeated practice.

For an example, let's look at the following example from a reading about Sir Walter Raleigh which appeared in 13 Scientific Readings Kayhan Press, Tehran, 1978, concerning the introduction of tobacco smoking in Europe in the 16th century.

“Lots of people partake in tobacco each year.”

The teacher could ask the following questions.

1) Do you recognize any words in the target vocabulary item?

Answer : “take” and “in”

2) Is the sentence positive or negative grammatically?

Answer : It's positive.

3) Is partake a noun, verb, adjective, adverb or preposition?

Answer : It's a verb.

4) Since it's a verb does it involve doing something, talking, thinking or being?

Answer : Doing something.

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Knowing this the student should be able to answer this final question : Does to partake in tobacco mean to use or not use tobacco?

Answer : to use.

Once again it must be stressed that this is how native speakers actually read. We don't go to a dictionary each time we meet a new word. There are times when we have to, but most of the time we guess. Mastering this skill is one key to independent reading.

Teachers must also inform students when words should or should not be used with each other. This "co-occurrence of words" or the lack of it occurs not because of any morphological or syntactical rule but because their meanings are totally non-complementary or because they are simply not a part of common usage. For example we would not normally talk about "round men", although we do frequently talk about "fat men". Likewise we might say "The man stood on the chair." but not "the man rode on a chair" in all but the most specific of cases. When teaching a reading about tobacco, a teacher could ask the students to list all words related to smoking. The following words are present, for example, in the article on Walter Raleigh: thick, heavy, dirty, blew, fire, cigarette, air, pipe.

Teachers should also be ready to explain situations where word value differs from one culture to another. For example, the word "agressive," highly negative in Japanese, is often a positive word in English.

Lastly the teacher is frequently the only source of cultural information available to the students. The greatest differences in language are frequently found here, and these differences must be explained and sometimes taught. Even when a form appears in two languages, their actual forms may be completely different.

The effect of logic (rhetoric) on language is broad. It affects our question and answer patterns.

ex. Are you here?

Yes, I am. — correct.

No, I'm not. — incorrect. If you weren' here you wouldn't answer.

As a result, students should be encouraged to ask as well as answer questions about their readings. Furthermore, they should be able to formulate definitions, collect evidence in support or in opposition to their position, evaluate information, make comparisons, draw inferences and perform many other reading skills. A student of chemistry should be able to determine from his reading if the experiment was successful. A music

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student should be able to transfer a set of instructions onto a keyboard to produce the expected sound. A reader of a political speech should be able to interpret indirect admissions of failure or uncertainty in an otherwise triumphant speech.

In summary, it is the reading teacher's job to teach the students to be their own teachers. The teacher should motivate students, provide them with information and train them in reading skills needed for successful silent reading. He should attempt to maximize the students' role in the classroom whenever possible. Students should not only fulfill classroom tasks but should have an active role in creating them. The more students can be trained to take an active role in creating their own reading activities the quicker the goal of reading self-sufficiency will be reached.

Table of Rhetorical Reading Skills

question-answer	paragraph organization
question formation	outlining
definitions	summarizing
evidence	attributing ideas
evaluation	analysis
comparison-contrast	hypothesis
alternative	analogy
relevancy	spatial relations
inference	graphs
classification	tables
chronology	prediction
cause and effect	brainstorming
paraphrase	clustering
generalization	rewriting

Further Suggested Reading

1. F. Durbin, David Eskey and W. Grabe, Teaching Second Language Reading For Academic Purposes, Addison-Wesley, 1986
2. Michael Graves and Cheryll Cook, "Effects of Previewing Difficult Short Stories on Low Ability Junior High School Students" Comprehension, Recall and Attitudes, Reading Research Quarterly, pp.262-276, 1983

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3. Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell, The Natural Way, Alemany Press, 1983
4. J. C. Alderson, Reading In a Foreign Language Longman's, 1984
5. Kenneth Chastain, Developing Second Language Skills: Theory to Practice, Second Edition, Rand McNally College Publishing Company, 1976
6. John Downing, Reason and Reading, Springer-Verlac, 1979
7. Nicholas Ferguson, "Some Aspects of the Reading Process," English Teaching Forum, XXI, (3): 2-4, 1973
8. Nancy Wood, Improving Reading, Holt, Reinhardt and Winston, 1984
9. David Harris, Reading Improvement Exercises For Students of a Second Language, Prentice Hall, 1966
10. Lamar Thomas and H. Alan Robinson, Improving Reading In Every Class, Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1977