

Reading- a Means of Improving Fluency in English

Alina Mardari, lector superior

Rezumat

Articolul tratează "lectura" ca una dintre cele mai eficiente metode de învățare și predare a unei limbi străine, în cazul dat al limbii engleze. Pentru a atinge o competență înaltă cu ajutorul acestei metode, profesorul trebuie să cunoască nivelul de cunoștințe al elevilor și să aplice un șir de strategii ce pot duce la rezultate mari.

Definitions of Reading

Among the many definitions of reading that have arisen in recent decades, three prominent ideas emerge as most critical for understanding what "learning to read" means:

- Reading is a process undertaken to reduce uncertainty about meanings a text conveys.
- The process results from a negotiation of meaning between the text and its reader.
- The knowledge, expectations, and strategies a reader uses to uncover textual meaning all play decisive roles way the reader negotiates with the text's meaning.

A reader approaches a text with a huge store of prior knowledge and experience, including preconceptions about the uses of spoken and written language. As he or she notices particular ideas or facts in a text, the reader matches that information with background knowledge and is able to construct a version of the text's meaning. Researchers in text comprehension have applied an information-processing analogy to understanding how people think, learn, and remember what they read. When a person reads, two aspects of this "human information processing system" continuously interact. When the reader focuses primarily on what he or she already knows, this is called a concept-driven or "top-down" mode. On the other hand, when the reader relies primarily on textual features and information to comprehend, this is called a data-driven or "bottom-up" mode. In other words, the reader is constantly noticing parts of the text and comparing that sample with what he or she already knows.

What is literacy?

Literacy is a set of attitudes and beliefs about the ways of using spoken and written language that are acquired in the course of a person's socialization into a specific cultural context. Language and culture cannot be separated. That is why readers from two different cultural backgrounds can read the same text and construct very different models of what the text means. Consequently, teachers cannot assume that students who are good readers in their native language can simply apply successfully the same skills to reading in English. Reading in English requires a set of thinking skills and attitudes that grow out of the spoken and written use of the English language. Teaching reading in Standard English to second-language learners and other limited English proficient students means helping them acquire the literate behaviors, the ways of thinking about text, that are practised by native speakers of English. In fact, learning to read and comprehend a second language requires learning a secondary literacy: alternative cultural interpretations, cultural beliefs about language and discourse, and culture-specific formal and content schemata. It is important to realize that learning to read effectively in a second language literally alters the learner's cognitive structures and values orientation.

Teaching Reading: Applying Theory and Research to Practice

We can conclude, therefore, that second-language students need to learn to "think in English" in order to read effectively in English. Reading instruction needs to be based on training ESL and EFL students in new ways of talking and thinking about texts. In teaching reading, instructors need to take into account the following conclusions and recommendations of

educational researchers.

Cognitive psychologists have shown in their research that students learn new strategies or thinking processes most effectively when they are consciously aware of what they are doing. Once students are conscious of the processes, they can monitor their comprehension and apply appropriate strategies as needed for comprehending a text [2, p. 68].

Interacting and talking about text in particular ways is essential. Heath and others found that students develop literate skills when teachers encourage them to talk about written language, when teachers model comprehension strategies for them, and when students have opportunities to talk to each other about how they make sense of a text [6, p. 98].

Research has also shown that literacy is not a neutral technology, but is, in fact, a cultural artifact laden with the values and beliefs of the culture in which it arises [4, p. 84]. One's native language literacy (or primary Discourse, as Gee terms it) is acquired from birth by being socialized into the native language and the local culture's ways of using language. Literate behaviors grow out of the spoken and written language practices of a local culture. And according to Gee, serving as an apprentice to a "native" is the way one acquires a new literacy, or secondary Discourse [3, p. 96].

Research also confirms that students must read faster and with more fluency if they wish to read effectively. Faster reading promotes reading in thought units instead of one word at a time, and that leads to improved comprehension. [1, p. 112]

Krashen posited that the best way to improve reading is by reading. In recent years, research and practice have validated that idea. The benefits of extensive reading include fluency, vocabulary acquisition, awareness of grammar, models for writing, and an immersion in the culture of the second or foreign language [5, p. 89].

Finding effective methods of promoting second-language vocabulary acquisition seemed for many years, to be an impossible goal. Thanks to recent works on methodology word frequency lists are available that will allow teachers to focus on the words that will be the most useful for their students. Nation's approach combines direct instruction, extensive reading, and multiple exposures to the same words by any means necessary to promote learning [6, p. 201].

In order to read well in English, then, students need to do the following:

1. Develop a schema of the reading process that includes the idea that reading is more than translating—reading is thinking.
2. Talk about their reading, and explain how they make sense of a text.
3. Read extensively for pleasure in English, and discuss their reading with someone who can model the literate behaviors expected in an English-language context.
4. Break the habit of reading every word by reading faster.
6. Employ top-down processes effectively by learning to make connections between what they already know and what they are reading.
8. Enhance bottom-up processing by acquiring the most useful vocabulary and by learning strategies for guessing meaning in context.
9. Master the basic 2,000 words that constitute approximately 80 percent of texts in English.

Putting this all together, it is clear that students will learn to read in English best in a class that includes, on a regular basis, the following components:

Substantial amounts of extensive reading for pleasure, with opportunities for talking about their books with people who can model the literate skills required in English-language contexts.

Focused, interactive lessons on specific reading skills, with opportunities for students to

explain their thinking, and direct instruction on applying the skills strategically to a variety of texts.

Training and practice in fluency development (skimming, scanning, previewing) and reading rate improvement.

Vocabulary activities that include direct instruction in high-frequency words, multiple opportunities for exposure to and manipulation of the target words, and plenty of extensive reading.

Bibliography

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