Enhancing Reading Strategies Through Activities—A TESOL Arabia Report

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At TESOL Arabia 2006, we presented a workshop to discuss various skills that students require in order to achieve greater comprehension and enjoyment while reading. We discussed the need to assist students in gaining the skills they need to decode texts quickly to aid comprehension. To better help students decode texts, we demonstrated both bottom-up and top-down strategies. Through our activities, we demonstrated the concept that there are many methods of building reading fluency, such as timed or paced-reading, word recognition, reading-aloud, re-reading and extensive reading activities, which should all be included in a comprehensive reading program. (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). We shared several activities that teachers can use to encourage students to develop these skills. We focussed primarily on activities promoting word recognition (bottom-up skills), reading rate awareness and development, and prediction (top-down strategies). We then applied these skills to a shared reading experience.

Word Recognition:
Word recognition activities are especially useful for students with a different orthography in their first language. They can be used for any skill level, from beginner to advanced. They can also be adapted to listening exercises (for pronunciation practice and recognition) and target specific Vocabulary-to-Learn lists. The teacher can work with phonemes (hat, bat, mat) or vowel differentiation (bit, bat, bet). The teacher can work with minimal pairs (pat/bat), pronunciation patterns such as –ed endings (educated, worked, tricked), numbers, abbreviations, symbols, etc. At a more advanced level, recognition techniques can promote phrase recognition, collocations, idiomatic expressions. The use of concordance programs is beneficial in developing activities at this stage. These activities are easily adaptable to any curriculum and can be used by students of any linguistic ability level.

Reading Rate Development:
We shared a specific “Build-up Reading” activity with the participants as a consciousness-raising exercise, to illustrate the need for students (and teachers) to be aware of student reading rates. Most teachers were not aware of their students’ WPM reading rate; without awareness, there is less chance of improvement (Anderson 1999). After learning their WPM rate, students are able to set individual goals for increasing their reading speed. The aim of this is not speed reading, but a conscious attempt to increase reading speed while maintaining a consistent level of reading comprehension. Therefore research suggests using a text that is readily comprehensible for students (i.e. slightly below their level of understanding). This type of activity lends itself well to the use of graded readers, which contain a large percentage of high frequency words.

There is some debate over what reading rate constitutes a “mature reader” but, in general, the research (Carver, 1990) suggests that a first-year university student whose native language is not English needs a minimum of 200—300 WPM to be on a par with native English speakers in an academic setting. This is considered the threshold between immature and mature readers. Below 200 is considered too slow for efficient comprehension and enjoyment. A slow reader is one who reads less than 150 WPM, and a fast reader one who reads greater than 350 WPM.
**Prediction:**

All mature readers need and use prediction when reading a text; we naturally read with several questions in mind, especially when reading for pleasure. Students tend not to apply prediction skills to academic texts, perhaps seeing them as providing less emotive leeway than non-academic reading, but the same techniques can be used. Prediction activities can move beyond the “What do you think the main idea is?” approach, and can be introduced in a variety of ways to make reading more interesting for the students. The goal is to activate their existing knowledge and do some schema building.

We demonstrated how a teacher can use authentic materials at any level. We used a realia “grab bag” to arouse interest and predict content, as suggested by Meredith Pike-Baky. This can be used either as a jigsaw activity with five groups and five different bags, or as a class pre-reading exercise with one grab bag. Five articles are placed in a bag and, in turn, students draw them out. They try to guess the relationship between the items or how they might relate to the coming story.

Flexibility is the key with this type of activity. It can be adapted to the student level, with more guidance provided through a closer relationship between items and more specific and detailed objects. There are added benefits of vocabulary building and providing visuals to match the words. The important thing is that the activity can be used with any genre (academic, opinion, poetry, etc) and can enhance the reading of longer works like Graded Readers and novels. It is a good introduction into a new text and can offer benefits in re-motivating and re-involving the students during a longer piece of writing.

**Shared Reading:**

We finished with an example of how these skills and strategies can be brought together in a shared reading experience, through the use of Graded Readers in the classroom. The teacher selects a story that parallels the theme(s) that the students are studying, and the class reads silently together while a section of the story is read aloud via a tape or the teacher. The pace of the reading and the support of the voice encourage students to absorb word clusters rather than approach the text word-by-word. Questions and activities in an activity booklet can check comprehension after the reading; practice summary writing; develop question formation; and build vocabulary. The types of questions asked can develop from relatively simple "Wh-" questions to more complex ones requiring inference from the story action. Prediction activities are used periodically throughout the book to explain some unfamiliar vocabulary and encourage students to predict the action in a story followed over several days and weeks. At the end of a book, students can use the questions they prepared during the course of the reading to test their understanding and memory of story details in a board-game activity.

At the end of one or more books, the students reflect (in anonymous writing) upon the shared reading and its effect, if any, upon their reading skills. Students have consistently indicated that they felt the experience increased their reading speed and understanding, and enlarged their vocabulary. (As a teacher, it was also gratifying to see some new vocabulary appear later in other writing assignments.) While students often found inference questions quite difficult, and were not especially fond of summary writing, they did recognize that their skills in both of these areas had improved, and their confidence in approaching such tasks was greater than before. And their satisfaction in being able to answer the board-game questions created by the class members was enjoyable for both teacher and students.
UGRU Resources:
If you are interested in more information, resources, examples and activities, you can contact Lori Brandin or Barbara Reimer. We also encourage you to visit the UGRU ftp site and look at the materials in the Level 2 Reading Rate Development folder.

Primary References:


