

USEFUL TIPS FOR READING COMPREHENSION ACTIVITIES

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I. INTRODUCTION

We are used to thinking that Reading Comprehension is a passive and receptive activity which doesn't involve the student-teacher interaction further than the teacher being a talking dictionary. This conception leads us to believe that once the student is able to answer a set of mechanical questions which doesn't test the student's understanding but consists of a rather mechanical translation and/or transcription of the information found in the text, then the student can read. The fact that the student is facing a foreign language makes him rely on this type of activity. He is ready to accept this system as it requires the least effort on his part. Not only that but also he is accustomed to this method as it is the same that was used in his mother tongue classes, at least in a Mexican Public Primary School. Remember the way teachers evaluated your comprehension. You will realize that memory rather than comprehension was tested, and that in daily activities the teacher-learning process was almost omitted. As a result, students were never taught how to understand what they were reading. Nevertheless, the students managed to develop some reading strategies in their mother tongue, although they were seldom aware of them. However, these strategies are not likely to be naturally transferred to reading comprehension activities in a foreign language due to:

- a) Unconscious knowledge of the reading strategies they have developed in their mother tongue.
- b) Unfamiliarity with the foreign language.
- c) The methods used at present in the Reading Comprehension class inhibit the development of reading strategies.

Fortunately, this misconception about reading has started to change. Reading is no longer regarded as a perception done by the eye leading to the ability of putting letters together to form words which should be identified by the reader. If we assert that a fluent reader reads for meaning, not for the identification of letters, words and phrases, then we have to accept that:

- a) Only a certain part of the information necessary for reading comprehension comes from the printed page. The reader brings all his previous knowledge of the world and his mental activity to give and add meaning to the text, organizing the incoming information and interpreting it.
- b) Comprehension can precede the identification of individual words.
- c) Fluent reading is not decoding to spoken language.
(Smith, 1981).

Therefore, it is up to the teacher to bring out new ideas, methods and materials to help students to reach understanding of the reading material by developing a different attitude towards the reading process in which the student will become an active element.

The SEP English program for secondary schools is ambiguous as far as objectives and methodology are concerned and although many teachers at this level know about reading strategies they are afraid of applying them in the classroom because of their inexperience with reading strategies and the extraordinary size of their classes which at the best of times are difficult to control.

In this paper we hope to offer some ideas which should be useful for all those teachers who are conscious of the importance of this ability, since non effective techniques will have a negative effect at university level where being able to read quickly and efficiently in English becomes essential.

II. SUGGESTED TECHNIQUES

1. DEVELOPING READING AWARENESS. Here we want to sensitize our students to the fact that different objectives determine different ways of reading. From this we expect students to feel more free when working with an English text and so becoming more efficient readers.

- a) Bring to class different kinds of reading material in Spanish, such as a telephone directory newspaper articles and editorials, menus, essays, poems, recipes, scientific texts, letters, a T.V. guide, political news and propaganda, etc.
- b) Assign each student a text and a task according to the type of material he has been given.

Examples:

<u>Material</u>	<u>Task</u>
Telephone Directory	Look up someone's specific telephone number.
Letter	To who and for what was the letter written?
Menu	What is the speciality of the restaurant?
Poem	What kind of feelings are expressed?
T.V. Guide	What time is a specific program on?
Essay and newspaper editorial	What is the author's opinion?
Newspaper article	Summarize the text.
Scientific article	What are the conclusions of the research?
Political text and propaganda	What are they trying to convince you of?

- c) Allow some time for students to carry out the task individually.
- d) Hold a brief discussion where students are able to comment on how they managed to accomplish the task, what procedure they followed and why, etc. This should lead students to conclude that they use different reading styles which are determined beforehand by the objective they have in mind. The teacher should make the students aware that this can be transferred to their reading in English by using adequate strategies which they will develop along the course.

2. INFERRING MEANING FROM CONTEXT. Here we want to make our students aware that they don't need to stop at every unknown word they find to look it up in a dictionary.

- a) Select an easy paragraph in Spanish and omit some key words that can be inferred from context. It is important to mention here that the teacher must make sure that there are elements within the text that in fact lead to determine what the missing words are.
- b) Have students work individually and then give some time for students to compare their results.
- c) Open a total class discussion where students comment on the elements that helped them arrive to their final answers (additional information within the text, their previous knowledge of the topic, logical consequences of the organization of the text, etc.), and whether they found the task easy or difficult.

The two previous activities may be repeated afterwards using easy but authentic texts in English.

3. MATCHING PICTURES WITH HEADLINES. Here we want our students to use their non linguistic skills and own knowledge of the world in order to give meaning to what they read. Students should be encouraged to do the same when working with longer and more complicated texts too.

- a) Choose some headlines from an English newspaper and cut them out. Select also some pictures related to the headlines. (If the newspaper doesn't provide them all, get them from a different source, but make sure that the pictures are closely related to the headlines).
- b) Distribute the material and exchange brief oral comments on the pictures.
- c) Tell the students they will try to match a headline with a picture, individually. Allow some time for this and then have students compare their results in pairs.
- d) Check the exercise with the whole class and discuss the things that helped them complete the task.

4. ORGANIZING HEADLINES IN THE CORRECT ORDER. Here the students will get acquainted with the English word order, which sometimes plays an important role in understanding a sentence, a paragraph and even a text. The students will arrange scrambled headlines in a logical order.

- a) Students form groups of three.
- b) Each group is given a set of six scrambled headlines. Students discuss the way in which the headlines can be ordered.
- c) Teacher asks each group to give the correct order of the headlines, one by one, writing everything on the board.
- d) Open discussion is carried out and modifications are made on the board according to the groups' opinions until the correct version is arrived at.
- e) If the headlines are suitable, the teacher may try to draw the students' attention to some special endings such as -en after nouns and adjectives (threat, threaten; dark, darken, etc.), -ness (happy, happiness), -er (big, bigger; wide, wider), -est (short, shortest; small, smallest), and have a guided discussion that should end with correct conclusions on the part of the students. Other aspects may be dealt with, such as the position of adjectives in relation to nouns, etc., depending on the type of headlines chosen.

5. MATCHING THE HEADLINE WITH THE CORRESPONDING PIECE OF INFORMATION. This activity is intended to develop scanning and search reading.

- a) Students get in groups of three. Teacher distribute a set of headlines and a set of small pieces of information taken from the corresponding newspaper article. There should be more headlines than pieces of information (distractors).
- b) The procedure may be similar to the ones described above.

6. PREDICTING. The ability to predict what a text will be about often simplifies our reading task. Our predictions are generally based on our previous knowledge of the world.

- a) Choose a text about a well-known topic or one of general interest to the group.
- b) In groups of three, students look at the text especially at the pictures, which may add information. They should try to get to know where the text was taken from and the implications this has. Then, they proceed to share their own knowledge about the subject by having a total class discussion. This is a good activity to motivate the students and to introduce any kind of text before some other activity. After the discussion, the students will have certain expectations about the content and they will play a more active role at the time of reading.

7. ORGANIZING THE SEQUENCE OF A TEXT.

- a) Give each student a short essay on a topic he is interested in. The essay must be broken into paragraphs or groups of paragraphs which the student will organize in the correct order.

By doing this, students will get acquainted with the usual organization of an argumentative text, which will simplify the task of understanding the hypothesis, the main idea, the conclusions and the author's opinion in further activities.

Most of the above activities are intended for students who are just beginning their reading comprehension course. More sophisticated activities with more difficult tasks should be assigned gradually.

III. PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

1. Let students suggest and/or bring reading materials.
2. Spanish must be used to express ourselves during reading comprehension classes.
3. Make students aware of reading strategies. Talk about them while teaching.

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