

Are They Reading Properly?

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Introduction

To help students survive, we, as ESL instructors, are often eager to teach our students how to comprehend what they are listening to and how to speak. Reading was never considered of primary importance to help students survive as it was traditionally placed third in the four skills sequence. Yet listening and speaking require not only different aspects of knowledge, but also vocabulary and sentence structures. To understand listening and to be able to speak, students need input first. Though listening and speaking come first in the traditional sequence, the role of reading can not be denied in terms of input and output.

According to Palmer (1917), language learning involves an “incubation period.” As such, we want to emphasize that reading can be an important source of input for adult students and based on reading, the four language skills can be developed in students.

In this paper, we will first discuss the importance of reading in non-credit classes. Then after a brief review of the relevant literature on reading such as the skills-based approach, we will focus on reading for main ideas, one of the skills practiced when we teach reading in our classes. Advantages will be analyzed at the end of this paper.

The Importance of Reading

The importance of reading is self-evident. Socially, reading can occur anywhere and anytime. When traveling, we read guides, maps and schedules; when working, we read instructions, rules and regulations; when tired, we read for relaxation. Reading is essential to life and success in our society. Besides, reading ability is highly valued and important for social and economic advancement. Academically, the importance of reading can never be over-emphasized, either. Since an ability to read presupposes most

of the knowledge necessary for students to communicate---social, cultural, grammatical, vocabulary and phonological, it can be the foundation of other skills. Krashen (1983) emphasizes that reading can serve as an important source of comprehensive input; it may contribute significantly to the development of overall proficiency.

How, then, do we teach reading? Our experience in teaching non-credit students at all levels reveals that teaching linguistic knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary is not enough; students need to be trained to master some reading skills.

Why Teach Reading Skills?

Our assertion to teach reading skills is based on several experiments conducted when we asked our students to read some paragraphs and find out what the paragraphs are about. In terms of material content, these lessons are suitable for intermediate level students, but easy for advanced level students in our non-credit classes. Nevertheless, when asked to look for main ideas/topic sentences, students at all levels find it difficult. Accordingly, it turns out that few students can find the right topic sentences. Apparently, they don't know where to look for the topic sentences. Therefore, maybe we can say that almost everyone with some knowledge of language can read, but not everyone can read well; having an ability to read does not mean that one necessarily has reading skills. To read properly, one needs to be taught skills. How does one teach reading skills? To provide an answer to this question, let's first take a look at the basic views of reading instruction.

A Brief Review of the Literature

Research on reading can be traced back to as early as a century ago, but discussions on appropriate reading instruction started only in the 60s. Ever since then, debates on

reading instruction have focused on two approaches: the skills-based approach and the meaning-based approach.

The skills-based approach emphasizes the teaching of phonics—the separate systematic teaching of the sound-letter relationships. The meaning-based approach, in contrast, emphasizes comprehension and meaning in texts.

Research shows that both approaches have had strong influences on reading instruction, especially with young readers. What about adult readers? Given their ages and experiences, our adult readers will not just learn skills without focus on the content.

Therefore, we need to integrate the above two approaches to produce an effective result. The best way to teach reading skills is to know what our students' needs are. We teach main idea reading skills in content areas. In other words, we combine teaching reading skills with teaching reading comprehension. Without reading skills, students can not comprehend the text properly and reading without gaining proper comprehension is not reading.

To teach students to find the main ideas, we need to help them differentiate the general ideas from the specific ones first. The following are examples of what we do in our classes to prepare our students for the main idea readings.

Step 1:

Word practice: Circle the word that is the most general in the group.

- 1) children wife family parents
- 2) leader pope president general
- 3) poetry literature fiction drama

In doing an exercise such as the one above, we help our students understand that the general idea includes all the specific ideas. For example, in the first group, the most general word is “family” which includes the ideas of all the other three words. Therefore, it is the general idea. Parents, wife and children are members of a family; they are specific ideas.

Step 2:

Topic sentence practice: Circle the best answer after reading the passages. (Note: the topic sentences are underlined for your convenience).

1. Bringing a new life into this world is a serious commitment. Carrying a child for nine months isn't all that easy. You have to make sure you're healthy and that you eat properly for your child. That includes not drinking, smoking, or doing drugs, though doctors do say that it is healthy to have a glass of wine every now and then to relax you. You must consider prenatal care and Lamaze classes if you want to make it easy for yourself.

The topic of this paragraph is:

- A. Commitment
- B. Carrying a baby is a serious commitment.
- C. To carry a baby, you must keep healthy.

2. Would you favor a course called “Celebrating Diversity,” a course in which all students would be required to study the differences in ethnic and cultural background and gender orientation that exist in the community and on campus in an effort to heighten sensitivities? In my opinion, No! The school should not require this kind of course. For

some of us, taking a course like this wastes our time, wastes our money, and creates a false sense of obligation.

The topic of this paragraph is:

- A. Celebrating diversity
- B. Taking a course of this kind wastes time.
- C. The school should not require this course.

3. A centenarian is a person who is at least 100 years old. Centenarians are honored by television shows such as NBC's Today show, where, each day, a person at least 100 is shown on the weather report. When this practice first started a number of years ago, there were days when no one was honored. Recently, however, the number of centenarians has increased so dramatically that those shown are selected in a random drawing. The last census reported that there were over 35,000 centenarians living in the United States, more than double the number ten years ago. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that within a hundred years, there will be more than one million centenarians in the country.

The topic of this paragraph is:

- A. The growing number of centenarians
- B. Honoring centenarians on the Today show
- C. Centenarians

Group discussions are organized after doing exercises like the ones above to make sure that students understand which one is the right answer and which one is too general or too specific—the topic of a paragraph should be neither too general nor too specific. For example, in the first paragraph, the first choice, “Commitment” is too general. There are many aspects of commitment. This paragraph is only talking about one aspect of

commitment. The second choice, “Carrying a baby is a serious commitment,” is exactly what this paragraph is about; therefore, it is the right answer. The third choice, “To carry a baby, you must keep healthy,” is too specific—it is only one of the many things that you should do to be committed to your child.

Once students have learnt how to differentiate the general ideas from the specific ones, they are ready to look for the topic sentences which embody the general ideas in paragraphs.

Step 3:

Finally, to reinforce the skills, we help students locate where topic sentences mainly lie.

A topic sentence usually lies in:

1. The beginning of a paragraph --1st/2nd sentence. (Note: If the first one is a question, it cannot be a topic sentence; if what follows is a short answer like YES or NO, that cannot be a topic sentence, either. Look for the sentence following the question or the short answer. Refer to Step 2, the underlined sentences in paragraphs 1 and 2.);
2. The middle of a paragraph, especially following words like BUT or HOWEVER which introduces the main idea (Refer to Step 2, the underlined sentence in paragraph 3.);
3. The end of a paragraph which summarizes all the points discussed in the paragraph;
4. Both the beginning and the end of a paragraph; and
5. A topic sentence may also be imbedded in the paragraph.

For points 3 and 4, please refer to the following examples:

1. Some students prefer a strict teacher who tells them exactly what to do. Others prefer to be left to work on their own. Still others like a democratic discussion type of class. No one teaching method can be devised to satisfy all students at the same time.

2. Good manners are important in all countries, but ways of expressing good manners are different from country to country. Americans eat with knives and forks; Japanese eat with chopsticks. Americans say “Hi” when they meet; Japanese bow. Many Americans open doors for women; Japanese men do not. On the surface, it appears that good manners in America are not good manners in Japan, and in a way this is true. But in any country, the only manners that are important are those involving one person’s behavior toward another person. In all countries it is good manners to behave considerately toward others and bad manners not to. It is only the way of behaving politely that differs from country to country.

The advantages of this training are obvious. It not only enhanced students reading speed, but their reading comprehension ability is heightened. Most of all, this skill is transferable. It will help them in other activities.

Conclusion

To teach adult students how to read, we must gear our instruction to their needs. The reading for the main idea skill can be taught within content areas to produce ideal effects. And reading, in the final analysis, can be used to enhance our students’ English ability in the four skills.

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