

Teaching and Learning to read: an obstacle race

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The opinions and views expressed in this article arise from my experiences in the classroom. I have substantiated these by summarising the insights and research findings of some authors whom I shall be quoting. One of the greatest challenges that I have faced in ELT is enabling intermediate level students to make progress in their ability to read. Despite the arsenal of reading strategies and skills we arm our students with, the success rate in reading tests looks rather bleak. This article attempts to explore some of the problems teachers and students encounter in the obstacle race of reading and the reason why “winning” is incredibly difficult.

Imagine a scenario where winning an obstacle race is important. The race is timed and extremely stressful because the obstacles are an unknown entity and are shrouded in mist and visibility is hazy. Lots of practice could be had in dealing with different types of obstacles. However, the ultimate test lies in encountering new and unknown obstacles. Success in such a race is uncertain and definitely unpredictable. In my opinion, teaching and learning to read is like running an obstacle race for both teachers and students.

The best way to tackle such an obstacle race is to adopt a problem-solving approach. Our first problem arises from the fact that students who are more accustomed to rote-learning and memorising find it rather difficult to adopt the problem-solving approach. They feel secure when they are given something to “study” and they are successful when they are tested on what they have learnt. However, performing well in a reading test involves delving into an unknown context, applying skills and strategies, thinking and reasoning. They find this extremely demanding.

Perhaps the best way to highlight the perils we face in teaching/learning to read is by comparing it with the way we teach/learn writing. In writing, errors become clearly manifest. They can be identified, categorised and remedial work can be done. Motivated students do become aware of the typical errors they make and avoid repeating them. In a reading class, however, the errors occur in the student’s mind. There may be a gap between the teacher’s perception of a student’s receptive powers and the way the student actually processes information in his/her mind. In other words, it is quite possible for teacher and student to comprehend and interpret the same information in entirely different ways. The real seriousness of the problem lies in the possibility that the teacher is blissfully unaware that this has happened. Indeed, reading is a private mental or cognitive process. As Davies comments, “The process of reading and responding to a writer is not directly observable” (1995:1).

The gap between the teacher and learner in a reading class is widened by the fact that most of the reading is done silently. As we know, when students read aloud, they mispronounce key words, apply stops in the wrong places and read word by word with a clipped intonation. I believe all this goes on silently (or in a whisper) when they read silently. Above all, they skip key words and / or read only parts of sentences. The greatest enigma for the teacher is how to figure out what kind of mistakes are being made in the minds of the students as they read. Traditionally, researchers of reading behaviour have used oral reading as a diagnostic tool as we can see and hear to what extent oral reading matches the reading text. It is thus possible to get information about how individual readers are approaching a text and about strategies they use when confronted with difficulties. Researchers have also used miscue analysis, the analysis and classification of errors in reading aloud, as a source of information about how readers are processing text. However, analysing errors in the context of silent reading is a much more complicated task. Traditionally this has been done by giving students comprehension tests, cloze tests, writing summaries of texts or having discussions. The main issue here is that these test the *product* of reading and not the *process*. Even if the tests are well-written, they do not reveal the thought process of the student and how he / she has

arrived at the answer. And it is still difficult to assess whether the student has really understood or not. Needless to say, short answers and summaries are far more effective in revealing the student's thought process than multiple choice or cloze tests.

More recently, teachers and researchers have been gathering and using introspective data and methods for investigating the way in which readers process texts. Readers are asked to report on their thought processes during reading by thinking aloud or more realistically, talking to a partner. The long-term goal is to encourage students to become increasingly aware and capable of monitoring their own reading behaviour.

Teachers are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that individuals process information differently. In attempting to analyse what goes on in the visual system and the brain during the process of reading, researchers in the last thirty years or so have formulated various abstract models of the reading process. The most influential of these are *Gough's bottom-up model* (1972), *Goodman's top-down model* (1969,1970,1975,1988), *Rummelhart's interactive model* (1977,1984) and *Rayner and Pollatsek's bottom-up interactive model* (1989). To summarize these briefly, the *bottom-up model* projects readers as 'plodding through print' and supports the phonic-based method of teaching reading. The *top-down model* side-tracks visual decoding and places its emphasis on reader predictions, postulating that the reader 'leaps toward meaning' by sampling sentences as a whole. The hypotheses of the *interactive model* is that readers process information simultaneously from more than one source. This model encourages readers to become sensitive to all sources of information and teachers to use methods of teaching that are appropriate to the learners. The Rummelhart model also asserts that we can only interpret visual information and words by relating them to our prior experience and knowledge. Thus, effective reading is essentially an on-going thinking process. At different stages of the reading process, different sources of information interact with each other and are utilised in unpredictable ways, which are not open to observation. The *bottom-up interactive model* argues that comprehension is the combined result of the processing of visual information together with other sources of information such as semantic, syntactic or background knowledge.

Interestingly, other abstract models of reading have been proposed which incorporate affective factors such as attitude, motivation, emotions and physical feelings. It is an understatement to say that successful reading will not occur in the absence of positive attitudes and motivation. When foreign language learners are extrinsically, rather than intrinsically motivated, their motivation may spring from the desire to score high on a test or the desire to improve one's situation in life. Anxiety often accompanies extrinsic motivation and this has disruptive effects on reading because it involves thinking, problem-solving and other cognitive activities.

The matter gets more complicated because reading and interpretation of a text also depends to a great extent on personality, situations, circumstances, culture and upbringing. For example, English idioms and phrasal verbs, which occur frequently in authentic texts, are certainly obstacles. Phrasal verbs have specialised meanings and are as Moon describes them "arbitrary combinations which cannot be analysed and rationalised" (1992). Idioms are a puzzle to foreign learners because they are metaphorical and have holistic meanings, which usually bear no relationship to the meaning of their component parts. And the differences between American and British usage, Grammar and vocabulary are definitely stumbling blocks for foreign learners.

Again, in real-world reading, the scope of the content is too wide. Besides, "authentic" readings very often ramble, are repetitive and poorly organised. Students may not find perfect introductions, conclusions, topic sentences and linking devices expected in an ideal piece of writing. In writing courses, on the other hand, the writing may be thematic or belonging to a certain style or genre. The same kind of writing would naturally be tested. Students can

therefore anticipate the required grammar and use the appropriate register and aim for some accuracy in their writing.

Post-intermediate level EFL students also encounter difficulties with the syntax of authentic texts. Successful reading involves extracting the semantic gist of the sentences and understanding their relationship with other sentences in the text. According to Berman, the reader must be able to manipulate the inter-related components of a sentence in order to understand its basic prepositional content. “Good readers somehow manage to get at the *core* or *kernel* of complicated sentences” (1984:141).

Writer’s Example 1 :

As laws prohibiting interstate banking crumble, *commercial banking in the United States is beginning to resemble banking in other nations*, where a relatively few international banks provide financial services for the entire country.

(Firstbank Corporation, Contemporary Business,1996:556.)

When my students had to unravel sentences of such complexity, I encouraged them to first read the embedded clause between the commas.

Writer’s Example 2:

Also facilitating this go anywhere, do anything, employee-empowering attitude is Andersen’s concept of Just-in-time learning and training.

(Andersen Consulting , Contemporary Business,1996:43.)

Students are usually bewildered when they get adjective necklaces such as the one given above. Simply enabling them to recognise that *attitude* is a noun and the preceding words are *adjectives* helps students figure out this complicated sentence structure. However, as Berman (ibid.) concedes, “ syntactic complexity might be more of an impediment to grasping specific details than to overall ideas”.

New vocabulary has always been an obstacle. Most students worry at the sight of new and unfamiliar words. They have been told to “guess” meaning from context. Some students are not really successful at this problem-solving approach. They are either misled by the word itself or befuddled by the context. Besides, not all texts provide very clear context clues. Do dictionaries help? Sometimes. But there are problems here too. First of all, students are not able to identify the words they need to look up in order to comprehend the text. They waste time looking up irrelevant words. The sad result is they lose the thread of thought in the Reading passage and become confused. Besides, words with multiple meanings are traps. In a nutshell, many students are unable to use a monolingual dictionary efficiently.

All these difficulties are intensified by the fact that by and large, our students lack the reading habit. They rarely read outside the classroom. And therefore, their reading is limited to the texts and the time made available in their English courses.

Is there a magic key to unlock a student’s mind and observe the thought processes that occur there? If there is one, its custodian is surely the student himself. The student must “open up” and communicate with the teacher. He/she must analyse the problems encountered during reading. Once these are identified and the teacher becomes aware of the nature of the problem, there will be scope for a remedy. The need to establish clear channels of communication between the teacher and the learner cannot be over emphasised. Add to this, the interest and the desire to read, together with the intelligent acquisition and use of vocabulary, and the intermediate-level learner is equipped for his journey in reading.

References

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