

Some Notes on Teaching Reading to IT Students

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Abstract:

The paper follows a series of activities that can be employed in an ESP language lesson in order to train the reading skill. Targeted at IT students, the sequence develops in an integrative approach, as other skills are trained interdependently, in order to gradually build the students' confidence in tackling authentic materials: introductory activities, meant to activate the students' schemata; reading for gist; reading for specific information; post-activities. Finally, activities that train the processing of a specific genre, represented by computer magazine articles, are meant to lead towards extensive reading, which will foster student autonomy in the long-term acquisition of language.

Keywords: *extensive reading, intensive reading, ESP, ICT vocabulary, digital resources*

Like listening, reading is a *receptive* skill, which involves making sense of a text. There are several ways of reading a text, as we have different interests related to it, and there are also different types of texts. Along their working life, engineering specialists may find themselves in a variety of situations, in which they need to gather information from different types of texts in English, which they need to learn how to handle. Thus, they may have to read formal or informal emails, reports, technical specifications, newspaper and specialized magazine articles, research articles, specialized courses, webpages, etc. to name but the most obvious. Secondly, as part of a larger organization, their advice may be sought interdepartmentally, for example they can be asked for their opinion in the case of a service contract in the engineering field, which they need to read in detail.

To understand a text, it needs to be both *coherent* (to be logically connected to the world of knowledge) and *cohesive* (grammatically constructed so that its parts are held together as a whole). In order to make texts easier to understand, teachers should underline for students

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the stylistic elements and structure for each type, so that they should know what to expect from these texts and even more, in order to be able to write some of these types of texts themselves, in an imitative manner.

Generally, the literature distinguishes between four types of reading, so-called reading *subskills*:

- *reading for specific information* or *scanning* – the text is not read completely, but one hurries over most of it until some specific information is found;
- *reading for gist* or *skimming* – reading quickly through a text to get a general idea of what it is about;
- *reading for detail* – in order to get the meaning out of every word;
- *extensive reading* – reading long pieces of text, e.g. an article, with one's attention and interest varying; it is a subskill which needs to be given a lot of opportunities, in and out of class, in order for learners to develop their fluency in reading.

Learning activities which are intended to develop the reading skill are referred to as *intensive reading*, but this is not a subskill in itself. (adapted from Spratt, Pulverness & Alan 2005: 22-3)

Teachers should be able to choose texts according to their difficulty, or the learners' level. As is pointed out in Spratt *et al*, „We can make a difficult text easier for learners to read by giving them an easy comprehension task. Similarly, we can make an easier text more difficult by giving a hard comprehension task.” (2005: 23) The same authors speak about *simplified* texts, written especially for learners of English, and about *authentic material*, written for first language speakers. The idea is to build the learners' confidence and pass from easier to more complex texts, through exposure to both simplified and authentic materials.

And of course, it is obvious that learning to read will not only depend on the training of the different reading subskills; this skill will develop naturally, as new vocabulary and structures of grammar are acquired, and as the other skills (listening, speaking and writing) develop; language skills cannot develop individually, but there will always be interdependence.

In what follows, a section of an ESE textbook dedicated to training the reading skill will be analysed. That section is part of a larger unit, called „Living in a digital age”, in Santiago Remacha Esteras' *Infotech. English for computer users* (2008), intermediate level.

The reading section begins with „*introductory activities*” (Spratt *et al* 2005: 23), which consist of matching four captions with four pictures:

A. Match the captions (1-4) with the pictures (a-d).

1. In education, computers can make all the difference ___
2. Using a cashpoint, or ATM ___



3. The Internet in your pocket __
4. Controlling air traffic __ (Esteras 2008: 2)

This activity is meant to activate the students' general knowledge about the topic of the text. The task is easy at this point, but it leads to a speaking activity, which will arouse the students' interest, as they need to speculate in relation to a certain subject:

B. How are computers used in the situations above? In pairs, discuss your ideas. (Esteras 2008: 2)

By its completion, this further task will have generated a sufficient level of interest, and activated enough of the students' general knowledge about the topic to make the reading text a lot easier to process. As we can see, the next task follows naturally, as students will be reading for gist; it opens the „*main activities*” (Spratt *et al* 2005: 23) series:

C. Read the text and check your answers to B. (Esteras 2008: 2)

The text itself is in a simplified form, being written for language teaching purposes. The layout is easy to follow, with paragraphs that are separated by indent spaces. In the original layout, every fifth line is numbered, so that the teacher and students can more easily identify certain elements that need to be pointed out in the text; some key vocabulary items and collocations are written in bold letters; the syntax is simple, sentences are short and coordination among sentences is used more freely than subordination. A fragment of the text is provided below:

The digital age

We are now living in what some people call *the digital age*, meaning that computers have become an essential part of our lives. Young people who have grown up with PCs and mobile phones are often called *the digital generation*. Computers help students to **perform** mathematical **operations** and improve their maths skills. They are used to **access the Internet**, to **do** basic **research** and to communicate with other students around the world. Teachers use projectors and interactive whiteboards to **give presentations** and teach sciences, history or language courses. PCs are also used for administrative purposes – schools use word processors to **write letters**, and databases to **keep records** of students and teachers. A school website allows teachers to publish **exercises** for students to **complete** online. (Esteras 2008: 2)

The following task asks students to read for specific information, as they need to find a series of words and derive their meaning from context:



D. When you read a text, you will often see a new word that you don't recognize. If you can identify what type of word it is (noun, verb, adjective, etc.) it can help you guess the meaning.

Find the words (1-10) in the text above. Can you guess the meaning from context? Are they nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs? Write *n, v, adj* or *adv* next to each word.

1. perform (line 6) _____
2. word processor (line 13) _____
3. online (line 16) _____ [...] (Esteras 2008: 3)

For the next task, students also need to read for specific information, as it represents a continuation of the previous one:

E. Match the words in D (1-10) with the correct meanings (a-j).
(Esteras 2008: 3)

The last comprehension task represents a *post-activity* ("activities which ask learners to talk about how a topic relates to their own lives or give their opinions on parts of the text. These activities also require learners to use some of the language they have met in the text." (Spratt *et al* 2005: 23)):

F. In pairs, discuss these questions.

1. How are/were computers used in your school?
 2. How do you think computers will be used in school in the future?
- (Spratt *et al* 2005: 23)

As can be seen, the reading task has passed on to a speaking activity. The students' speaking skill has also improved following the reading activities, as new vocabulary has been acquired, which is going to be activated by developing a topic from the same area of knowledge: language related to computers.

Another example of a reading text, this time an authentic one, is the following, which was taken from an online journal:

Student Scholarship

The IEEE Computer Society is offering \$40,000 in student scholarships of \$1,000 and up to recognize and reward promising, active student volunteer leaders in student branches or chapters. The scholarships were established in honour of the late Richard E. Merwin, past president of the IEEE Computer Society. The winners of this award serve as IEEE Computer Society student ambassadors for their local IEEE region. Student ambassadors collect and disseminate information to



student branches or chapters in their region and serve as a liaison to the IEEE Computer Society Member and Geographic Activities Board. More than a dozen academic-year scholarships are available.

SCHOLARSHIP CRITERIA Graduate students and those in the final two years of an undergraduate program in electrical or computer engineering, computer science, or a well-defined computer-related field of engineering who are active members of a student branch or chapter are eligible. IEEE Computer Society membership is required. Applicants are required to have a minimum grade point average of 2.5 out of 4.0, and be full-time students as defined by their academic institution during the course of the award. Evaluation criteria include involvement in chapter or branch activities (40 percent), academic achievement (30 percent), other extracurricular activities in college (10 percent), and a letter of evaluation by a branch or chapter advisor (20 percent). Each winner will submit a brief statement at the end of the academic year outlining his or her accomplishments. (*IEEE Computer Society 2012: 101*)

The text can be used in a variety of ways in order to train the reading skill:

1. students can be given 10 seconds to tell what the text is about (reading for gist);
2. unknown words in the text can be identified by the students and their meaning derived with the teacher's help (scanning);
3. the online journal which the text was taken from can represent an opportunity for students for further, extensive reading, as it may have aroused their interest by providing information about student scholarships; therefore, it may appear to them as a valuable source of information which is worth referring to in the future (extensive reading);
4. the same interest in student scholarships from the students' part can lead to reading the whole text for detail; this will also be a good opportunity for the teacher to point out the structure and features of a newspaper article, which will subsequently facilitate the students' reading of similar texts.

In what follows, we will present some activities that can lead students towards a better understanding of journalistic language, as this may familiarize them with the genre and encourage their further engagement in extensive reading. More specifically, we will deal with the comprehension of magazine headlines, which will then develop into a discussion of the headlines of an online computer magazine, *PCMag.com*.

We can begin by explaining that headlines use a telegraphic style, with very few words, namely those having rich lexical meaning and which give readers a brief idea about the topic, thus often omitting grammatical function words (copulas, auxiliaries, articles, prepositions, conjunctions



etc.); the Present Tense Simple is very widely employed instead of other tenses, since authors seek to restrict the use of auxiliaries.

A good exercise would be to start by reversing the process, namely to make students become aware how neutral / normal sentences functioning in everyday language can be turned into headlines. A useful material of this type is provided by an exercise in Foley & Hall (2008), in general language, which begins with an example and follows with a few practice sentences:

Rewrite these sentences from newspaper articles as headlines to the articles. Use

the underlined words and phrases to help you.

1. The chief inspector of prisons last night called for the release of the Bulger killers.

Prisons chief calls for release of Bulger killers.

2. A High Court judge has blocked the proposed ban on tobacco adverts.

.....
3. The chief of police admitted that errors were made during the Chinese President's visit to the UK.

.....
(Foley & Hall 2008: 51)

After solving the exercise, an activity at hand in a synchronous online lesson is to access an online magazine (the chosen one is *PCMag.com*) and check whether students can understand the meaning of genuine headlines by shifting the process in the previous exercise. Thus, they will be asked to make neutral everyday sentences out of headlines of the type (note that headlines containing verbs in the Present Simple were chosen, in order to be consistent with the exercise above; also students will be encouraged to recover the meaning of the headlines from the main article body):

Twitter \$8 Verified Plan Relaunches Dec.2 With Blue, Gold, and Gray Checkmarks (Humphries 2022a) vs.

Elon Musk will relaunch the \$8 Verified Plan for Twitter on the 2nd of December along with a few different checkmark colours choices: blue, gold and gray.

Valve Bundles a Turkey Fryer With Repaired Steam Deck (Humphries 2022b) vs.

Valve video game developer has surprised a gamer by bundling a turkey fryer with a repaired Steam Deck handheld gaming computer.



Conclusions

While specialized vocabulary and grammar books can provide materials for training intensive reading, online digital resources are often convenient for extensive reading activities. Moreover, online texts are ideal for ICT language training, as the field of computers is very dynamic and IT specialists can keep track of the latest developments through readily accessible content. By gradually building the students' confidence to engage with authentic materials, learning autonomy and long-term language acquisition processes can be thus significantly stimulated.

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