Teaching Reading Skills: Problems & Suggestions

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Abstract:

It is generally known to everone that reading is a skill that comes from experience and needs to be constantly improved through different types of reading material. But that efficient reading involves many skill that need to be fostered in a classroom is a new idea. In order to elucidate this point, some task-based reading activities have been suggested for teachers of English to point out ways to inculcate independent reading habits in the students.

Introduction:

Reading is a receptive language process. It is the process of recognition, interpretation, and perception of written or printed materials. Reading proficiency plays a great role in understanding a written statement accurately and efficiently. Reading serves as an important tool in every field of professional service. In many situations reading is considered to be the indispensable channel of communication in an ever-widening world. In fact, we are living in a 'reading' world where it is difficult to manage without reading. In spite of great importance of reading focused course of instruction in Pakistani schools, colleges and Universities, the reading proficiency of the students particularly in English is not up to the mark or is very unsatisfactory. Unfortunately, the syllabus and teaching method in the educational institutions of Pakistan do not coordinate with the needs and the purpose of the learners. Because:

1.a The existing text books are old, teacher-centered and less effective in learners' situation.

1.b Teaching method of the Universities is not learner-centered, so students' involvement in learning through question and discussion is negligible.

1.c Only oral lecture method is the dominating method in the universities where the role of learners is not that of active participants.

1.d No chance is given to them to communicate or interact with the teacher or among themselves.

1.e Teacher's activities mainly consist of simple oral presentation throughout class time.

1. f No proper tasks or exercises for intensive reading are given in class and there is rare use of audio-visual aids overhead projector, T.V. etc.

However, due to many such reasons the students fail to comprehend textbooks properly. This is largely reflected in the poor performance of the students both in their

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classes, as well as in their every day life. Keeping in view all these difficulties and problems in mind I have very specific aims to achieve through this paper like:

(1)   Preparing learners to be able to read and understand effectively.
(2)   Preparing learners to be able to understand meaning of unknown Words using different strategies.
(3)   Preparing learners to be able to read with speed.

2. Objectives:

By teaching reading skills through Interactive approach, we may be able to achieve the following objectives:

2.a   Develop meaningful communication.
2.b   Selection of an appropriate reading passage/text**.**
2.c   Introduce task for communication to take place and the outcomes negotiate-able for the interaction.
2.d   Consider the learners as the center of attention.
2.e   Active role of learners in the decision-making process.
2.f   The learners interact with each other, help, and evaluate themselves in pairs/ group work.

3. Interactive process of reading:

The current-research based view of reading is that it is an interactive process, involving knowledge of the world and various types of the language knowledge, any of which may interact with any other to contribute to text comprehension (Carrell & Eisterhold 1988). According to Rumelhart (1980), efficient and effective reading requires both top-down and bottom-up process operating interactively. The term interactive may take on a number of meanings for reading researches. In general, the term interactive can refer to two different conceptions. First it can refer to the general interaction which takes place between the reader and the text.

The basic concept is that the reader reconstructs the text information based in part on the knowledge drawn from the text and in part from the prior knowledge available to the reader. Reading is thus viewed a kind of dialogue between the reader and the text (Barnett, 1989; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Second, the term interactive refers to the interaction of many component skills potentially in simultaneous operation; the interaction of these cognitive skills leads to fluent reading comprehension.

Interactive process of reading assumes that skills at all levels are interactively available to process and interpret the text. In their simplest forms such processing incorporates both top-down and bottom-up strategies.

4. Selection of Text as Appendices:

Now, I have selected few specific reading skills (with more emphasis on receptive skills) based on kinds of activities recommended in Francoise Grellet (1981), David

Nunan (1989) and Christine Nuttall (1982). These skills which include word-attack and text attack skills seem to be the most relevant to our situation.

I believe effective reading depends upon difficult level of the text, the unknown words in the text and background knowledge of the reader. It all contributes to the reading successfully getting the message of the writer. I have tried to make a point that difficult level in a reading text should be according to the level of the reader.

I have tried to focus on all those factors which make reading uneasy /or difficult for the learners. A list of such factors is given as under:

4.a   Vocabulary.
4.b   Structure of sentences.
4.c   Background knowledge of the students.

5. Vocabulary

I have minutely observed during conducting English Compulsory classes of B.SC (Hons) Part I-II for finding out the strong barriers which hinder reading comprehension of the students. The first and fore most problem, I found was unknown or difficult words. Such Vocabulary items which students thought were difficult for them proved to be a serious deterrent in the way of reading comprehension. Therefore, to over come this problem I have suggested to my students to follow and implement the following strategies:

5.a   To find the meaning of difficult words through textual clues.
5.b   To find the meaning of the words through understanding affixes (Prefixes and Suffixes). (See in appendix 3).

6.   Structure of Sentences:

During my practical work with students of B.SC (Hons) part-II, I also found that in addition to difficult Vocabulary items, the complex sentence structure also create a problem for the proper under standing of the text. Consequently, a large number of students do not benefit much from such texts which contain difficult sentence structure. Example to be given from the text "Spoon Feeding."

(a)   Selection of difficult sentence structure.
(b)   Strategies to make difficult sentence structure easy for the students to comprehend. (see appendix 4).

7. Background Knowledge:

In Pakistani Universities the text prescribed are poems, plays, essays and novels. These prescribed texts are nice literary masterpieces for the purpose to teach English and American literature rather than to teach the language. Inappropriacy of these text books is more to do with the cultural features that occur in the texts which students and in many cases even teachers can not explain to the learners. I have observed that a text which reflects and contains difficult words, do not coordinates with background

knowledge of the students and they do not know any thing about the subject under discussion, they feel it completely difficult to understand the text. For example, in Hemingway's novel "The Old Man and the Sea", there are many difficult words given there. Therefore, to overcome this problem I have suggested to my learners to follow and implement the following strategy:

(a)   To find the meaning of difficult words through textual clues.
      (See list of such words in appendix 2)

8. SUGGESTIONS for Teaching Reading Skills through Communicative Approach

Suggestions I am intending to submit is an attempt to teach reading skills and strategies through the communicative approach. The communicative approach is such an approach where comprehensible input and the task-based learning could exist together. To achieve this suitable objective, we have to adapt the following principles in communicative language teaching as suggested by Nunan (1988) and Harmer (1991).

8.1   The focus of every task should be on the performing of some operation…teaching the learner to do something in the target language. This something is communicatively useful.

8.ii   Use of language above the sentence level, with real language in real situations and pay attention to both the part and the whole work in the context.

8.iii   The practice of forms should take place within a communicative framework.

8.iv   Mistakes are not always mistakes. Emphasis should be on fluency.

8.v   What happens in the classroom must involve the learners and must be judged in terms of its effects on them.

9. Classroom Procedure: Shifting from teacher-centered to learner-centered approach

The existing teacher-centered procedure tends to make the learners in to passive recipients of knowledge. No chance is given to them to interact or communicate with teacher or among themselves. All this is in contrast with current methodological thinking, specially with communicative language teaching, where the objective is to achieve communicative competence and language learning is regarded as developmental process which involves the creative functioning of the learners mind.

Only learners own active efforts can ensure the development of such competence. By changing the procedure from passive memorizing and lecture method to developing reading skills through free communication in the classroom, where learners interact with each other, help and evaluate themselves in pair/group works, the system should change from teacher-centered to learner-centered.

10. Introducing Task-oriented Activities

For developing reading skills through communicative language teaching, I have suggested task-based activities. Such activities will make the interaction effective

between the teacher and the learners and between the learners themselves. Through the task-oriented teaching reading we can make the language learning purposeful and meaningful.

Task-based activities are backbone of teaching. Because the teacher's success or failure depends on the way s/he plans, organizes and controls the tasks. Methodologists concentrate more on the learning tasks that learners are involved in. Task-types suggested by different writers are: taking part in discussion, following or giving instruction, group discussions, presenting arguments and so on (Nuttall 1982; Howatt 1984; Nunan 1991).

The exercise types devised in the sample tasks can be very helpful if used appropriately and if necessary modified to the learners level and needs. The tasks mostly focus on answering the questions before and after reading the text. The purpose of these questions is to teach the learners various reading skills and strategies.

Questions in the sample tasks aim at:

— training the learners to comprehend text by using knowledge of the world and by using different skills such as skimming and scanning.
— training the learners to recognize the main idea of the passage or a text.
— training the learners to infer meaning by making use of the textual clues.
— to train the learners to recognize and understand relations between parts of a text through references.
— training the learners to make predictions and intelligent guesses when reading a text.
— developing learners understanding the communicative value of the text and sentences.
— training the learners distinguish between main and subordinate clauses by identifying Subject/ Verb/ Object (SVO) relations
— training the learners to identify the main ideas of text.
— training the learners to infer meaning of unknown words through the textual clues.
— training the learners how to comprehend and form new words.

11.   Developing Integrated Skills

As, Francoise Grellet (1981) suggests that reading comprehension should not be separated from the other skills (p-8). The integration of skills seems to occur naturally. I have also thought it to be pertinent to link the different skills through the reading tasks devised in the sample tasks such as mentioned below:

11.a Reading and listening, for example, listening to several summaries of the same text prepared by the learners with a purpose to enable them to focus on the main points in the text and listen to their classmates. For more authentic listening task they could be asked to summaries a text (See appendix 1, task 1).

11.b Reading and writing, for example, summarizing a text to one third of its original (see appendix 1).

11.c Reading and speaking, for example, discussion, appreciation after reading a text. The purpose is to enable the learners to react to different types of texts and to express their own ideas and opinion in English.

12. Method of Exploiting the Materials

Lead -in

I believe well-organized learning in terms of tasks and texts makes the process of learning much more achievable. Therefore, keeping in view our own situation, I have based teaching of reading skills on the following five methodological stages exemplified in appendices

Stage1

At this stage the teacher introduces the topic and explores the learner's previous knowledge of it.

| Directions for Comprehension Tasks |

Stage2

The teacher's role at this stage is to explain and clarify to the Learner about the tasks they will be doing. This would arouse their interest and they would see purpose in doing the tasks.

| Read and do the Task |

Stage3

At this stage the learners read silently and perform the task, e.g; answer the questions set beforehand.

| Feedback |

Stage4

The teacher gives feedback on the learners' performance of the task.

| Text -related follow-up Tasks |

Stage5

The teacher gives follow-up tasks related to the text.

Conclusion:

In the light of above discussion one can say that reading comprehension is one of the most important skills to be learned by the students. This will make them efficient reader.

Appendix 1

Purpose: To train the learners to identify the main idea/s of the text.
Skill Involved: Extracting salient points to summarize the text.
Reason: A comparison of several summaries of the same text will allow the learners to become conscious of the most common mistakes when summarizing. Asking for a certain length of summary will force the learner to select only what is important in the text.

TASK 1:

Read the following passage and summarize it to one third of its original. While summarizing keep the main points in view.

___

The Germans, too, until very recently, made reading a painful exercise. They still like large and closely printed pages, but when to this was added the black letter type, peculiarly trying to the eyes, and the contorted German sentence, sprawling over half a page, with the verbs, or parts of them, in a bunch at the end, we cannot say that the path of learning was made easy for the most diligent and plodding of nations. Even in English, if we compare the prose of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with that which is written to-day, we shall find that the earlier prose demands real mental exercise on the part of the reader. Modern prose, even when written quickly for ephemeral purposes, may not be beautiful or dignified, but is generally clear. There is no difficulty in understanding what any sentences means, and writers are careful not to jolt the minds of their readers by anything obscure or ambiguous. Our books are now printed in good plain type.

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TASK 2:

After you have finished summarizing, each member of the group will read his/her summary and the rest of the learners will listen. This will follow a discussion on the main points.

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The Germans, too, until very recently, made reading a painful exercise. They still like large and closely printed pages, but when to this was added the black letter type, peculiarly trying to the eyes, and the contorted German sentence, sprawling over half a page, with the verbs, or parts of them, in a bunch at the end, we cannot say that the path of learning was made easy for the most diligent and plodding of nations. Even in English, if we compare the prose of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with that which is written to-day, we shall find that the earlier prose demands real mental exercise

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TASK 3

Read the passage carefully and tick (-/) the appropriate column from the following which gives the main idea of the text.

MAIN IDEA
A. The passage reflects the peoples in old ages had problems in their eyes.
B. The people of old ages were lazy and inactive.
C. The people of old ages were strong to lift heavy weight.
D. The people of old ages had strong eye-sight.

Appendix 2

Skills Involved: Inferring meaning of unknown words through the textual clues.

Why: Training learners to infer meaning by making use of the clues the text supplies which is a powerful aid to reading comprehension and greatly speeds up learners reading. Secondly, skill of inferring meaning by using textual clues has the problem- solving characteristics that appeal to most learners and challenges them to make use of their intelligence.

Ernest Hemingway's Novel "The Old Man and the Sea"

P. No	L. No	Words
3	6	*Salao*
8	23	*guamo*
10	04	*DiMaggio*
20	20	*lamar*
20	27	*elmar*

P. No	L. No	Word	Textual Clues
3	6	*Salao*	worst form of unlucky

— In the novel, Hemingway has described the Oldman as a *Salao* because he fails to catch a single fish for long time.

— Eighty four days the Oldman struggles without catching a single fish than other fishermen regard him as *Salao*.

P. No	L. No	Word	Textual Clues
8	23	Guamo	Royal palm

— The little hut of the Oldman was made of *guamo* which is also called a royal palm.

— African people usually make their huts by using *guamo*, else where they are known as royal palm.

P. No	L. No	Word	Textual Clues
10	4	DiMaggio	Name of a Baseball game player

— The old man was very much interested in baseball and wanted to keep himself informed of the results of the match played between the Yankees and Indians.

— DiMaggio the great Yankee out-fielder was a source of inspiration for the old man because DiMaggio plays the game baseball by using his skill, his hearts and his endurance.

— As old man was confident of the victory of the DiMaggio, in the same way he was confident of his victory over the big fish as well.

P. No	L. No	Word	Textual Clues
20	20	*La mar*	*Feminine (Woman)*

— The old man loves the sea and always thinks of the La mar or as feminine.

— The old man always thought of the sea as something that gave or as simpleton women.

P. No	L. No	Word	Textual Clues
20	27	*el mar*	masculine

— He believes in his masculine strength.

— When the old man felt very tired, he thought of baseball, the lions and the brave DiMaggio who fights like a man.

Appendix 3.

Method:	To find the meaning of words through understanding affixes(Prefixes and Suffixes).
Purpose:	To train the learners how to comprehend and form new words.
Learning outcomes:	The learners would be able to know the meaning of words and how to use affixes to form new words.

Task – 1

All this may be right, or it may be only be inevitable. But do not let us deceive ourselves. Nature will make us pay for it. Nature takes away any faculty that is not used. She is taking away our natural defences, and has probably added nothing, since the beginning of the historical period, to our mental powers. The power of grappling with difficulties, and finding our way out of labyrinths, will soon be lost if we no longer need it. And after any derangement of our social order we might come to need it very badly. Besides, can we look with satisfaction at the completed product of civilization, a creature unable to masticate, to write, or to walk, a mere parasite on the machines that enable him to live? Many would prefer to be savages if they could have the magnificent physique of the Zulus or some South Sea Islanders.

L.No.	Prefix	Root	Suffix	Word
1	in	evitable		**inevitable**
2		our	selves	**ourselves**
3		probable	ly	**probably**
6		Long	er	**longer**
8		bad	ly	**badly**
9	un	able		**unable**
10	en	able		**enable**
12		island	ers	**islanders**

APPEDIX 4

Purpose of the Task:	To train the learners to recognize and understand anaphoric and cataphoric references in the text.
Skills Involved:	Understanding relations between parts of a text through references.

Reason:	One common way of linking structurally independent sentences in order to get a meaningful text is to use references (anaphoric and cataphoric). Failure to understand such references probably will lead to a serious misunderstanding of the text.

TASK 1

The same process of making things easy is discernible even in games. Half a century ago the cricket coaches at Eton and Harrow used to bowl to the elevens down a slope, to teach ***them*** how to stop the famous Lord's shooters. Now if a ball shoots at Lord's, which ***it*** hardly ever does, ***it*** always gets a wicket, and the aggrieved batsman complains of the ground-man. The modern mountaineer leaves ***it*** to others to 'climb the steep ascent of heaven in peril, toil, and pain'; ***he*** prefers a more comfortable way of getting to the top—he 'follows by the train'.

In the following passage all the Italiazed words refer to some thing mentioned before, or after, in the text.

L. No.	Word	Refer to something Before	Refer to something After	What it refers to.
4	*them*	X		Players(Elevens)
5	*It*	X		Ball
5	*It*	X		Ball
7	*It*		X	Steep
8	*He*	X		Mountaineer

Now work in groups and discuss the clues which you think helped you in making your choice.

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