A TAXONOMY OF PROCEDURES
FOR TEACHING EFL READING

David Peaty

Abstract

In order to ensure that their students gain the greatest possible benefits from working with a reading text, teachers need to select procedures which suit their objectives. The aim of this article is to present and discuss a taxonomy of such procedures.

Introduction

While there are many excellent books on how to teach reading and quite a few collections of interesting activities for reading classes, none that I have seen offers a concise, practical taxonomy of general classroom procedures. The aim of this article is to present such a taxonomy for the benefit of busy teachers preparing their lessons and designing new tasks. The procedures presented here have been drawn from a wide selection of resource books for teachers and course books for students, and will no doubt be familiar to experienced teachers.

Language teachers use reading passages for various purposes: to teach reading, language or content, to use as a model for a writing task, to exploit as a source of ideas for discussion, and so one. This article is concerned primarily with the use of texts for the purpose of developing reading proficiency.

Procedures for dealing with a reading passage are generally categorized according to whether they are followed before, while or after reading (e.g. Wallace, 1992 : 86), and those categories will be followed in this article. It should be noted, however, that certain procedures may belong to various categories, depending on how they are used. In particular, students may be asked questions about a text a) before they read it (in

order to activate schema), b) as they read it for the first time (in order to direct their attention to the main ideas), c) as they read it again (in order to direct them towards a deeper understanding) and d) after they have read it (in order to determine how much they have understood and what further help, if any, is needed). In the present taxonomy, the while-reading category embraces all procedures aimed at achieving a satisfactory level of comprehension while working with the text, including b), c) and d) above.

Taxonomy of procedures for teaching EFL reading
Before reading
stimulating students' curiosity

    students answer questions about the topic

    students predict what they will read

activating relevant schema

    students explore the theme individually

    students explore the theme together

explaining the task

    the teacher explains the goal.

    the teacher explains the conditions

facilitating the task

    the teacher presents background information

    the teacher presents key language

    the teacher explains cultural references

While reading
reading

    sustained silent reading

    silent reading of short segments

    silent reading of sentences

    oral reading

checking comprehension

    students answer questions

    students take notes

students translate

facilitating comprehension

the teacher simplifies

the teacher guides

the teacher explains

the teacher translates

students refer to a gloss

After reading

students summarize the text

students compare several texts

students match texts with titles/pictures/etc.

students resequence scrambled texts

practising reading skills

practising other language skills

Before reading

Most of the following pre-reading procedures can be conducted either in English or in the native language, and either orally or in writing. For information on a wide variety of pre-reading activities, please see Hess (1991).

stimulating students' curiosity

Students who read eagerly are more likely to benefit from the experience than those who read with reluctance. Collie and Slater go so far as to say "In some cases, we have devoted the entire class period to activities which, we hope, will make learners want to read the text - and then we have left them to get on with the short story or first section of a novel or play, on their own" (1987 : 17). The following procedures are intended to arouse students' interest in a text.

Students answer questions about the topic.

These questions could be based on fact, opinion or personal experience. Instead of questions, students could be given statements to mark True or False or to agree or disagree with.

Students predict what they will read.

Students are asked to look only at the title, the first sentence or paragraph and

any pictures and try to predict what they will read.

activating relevant schema

It is generally accepted that reading performance is better when readers apply their background knowledge (content schemata) and their knowledge of text structure (formal schemata) when reading (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1988 : 73-92). The following procedures can help students do this.

Students explore the theme individually.

This can be done by drawing lists or 'clusters' of related words and ideas, or by freewriting, in which students write down whatever occurs to them in relation to the theme. This could be done in English or the native language.

Students explore the theme together.

Students are asked to present what they already know, indicate what they would like to find out, discuss their opinions, describe their personal experiences, and so on. Stimuli for these procedures may be provided in the form of sets of questions or statements, data, pictures or objects, or audio and video recordings, Another procedure is to have students brainstorm on the theme, using techniques such as free association with a key word, which, according to Langer (1981), improves both comprehension and recall.

Students may work in pairs or groups, and communicate in English (for language practice) or the native language (to generate more ideas).

explaining the task

The teacher explains the goal.

It is important to tell students why they are going to read, so that they can choose the most appropriate mode or approach (skimming, scanning, careful or critical reading, and so on). If questions are to be answered, they should be presented at this stage.

The teacher explains the conditions.

If time limits are imposed, reading speed may be increased. If the use of dictionaries is forbidden, students may try to guess meanings from context. Collaboration between students in coping with reading problems may be encouraged or forbidden, depending on whether the teacher wishes to create a cooperative learning environment or to emphasize learner autonomy.

facilitating the task

These procedures are intended to help the reader understand the text. Nuttall (1982 : 146) warns us not to provide too much help: "In most reading lessons, the teacher does too much of the work, not realizing that what he is doing devalues the text and undermines the student's role as reader." However, reading can be extremely frustrating if the language or concepts are too difficult or if the text requires cultural knowledge which the student lacks. Teachers need to adopt procedures which make the text accessible to the student without reducing the challenge necessary for further development towards eventual autonomy.

The teacher presents relevant background information.

This may concern the writer, the historical and social context of a work, the main characters, setting and preceding events of a story, facts needed for a basic understanding of the subject matter, and so on.

The teacher presents key words, phrases and structures used in the text.

Language with which students would probably have difficulty could be presented in clear linguistic context or with definitions in English or the native language. This should be limited to a few important items; otherwise, students will not remember them. Less important items should be presented in a separate glossary for reference at the while-reading stage.

The teacher explains cultural references made in the text.

References to famous people, places, events, issues and so on should be explained in advance only if they are relevant to the whole text. If not, they should be presented in a separate glossary for reference at the while-reading stage.

While reading

Many teachers will agree with Nuttall (1982 : 146) that the teacher should "put a text in front of his students, assign tasks that will help the students to understand it... and then stand out of the way while the students get to grips with the text." Many others, however, want to guide their students through a text, exploring meaning, checking comprehension and resolving problems as they read. Each approach is valuable when used with appropriate texts, and both should be included in an EFL reading program.

reading

sustained silent reading

If the text is relatively easy and no more than a couple of pages long, students should read it through once on their own to pick up the gist. An appropriate time limit should be set.

silent reading of segments

If the text is too difficult or too long for sustained silent reading, students should be asked to read it in short segments, with pauses in between for checking comprehension and resolving problems.

silent reading of sentences

Many teachers feel that they should lead the class through the text, sentence by sentence. Even with this approach, students should be given time to read the sentence by themselves and try to work out what it means.

oral reading

Some teachers read the text aloud, play a recording of the text or have students read it aloud. Nuttall (1982 : 147) points out that if the text is read aloud to the students, they are deprived of an important task, that of associating what they see on the page with what they have learned aurally. Grellet (1981 : 10) gives convincing arguments against having students read a text aloud: it imposes a fixed reading speed and it prevents efficient reading strategies such as skipping and re-reading. At any rate, students should never be asked to read a text aloud before they have understood it (Lewis and Hill, 1992 : 110).

checking comprehension

Students answer questions about the text.

Questions may focus on gist, details, exact meaning, implication or interpretation. They may also be used to target specific features of discourse, such as reference and ellipsis, and skills such as guessing the meaning of a word from the context. They may be local, to be answered from a particular sentence, or global, requiring information from various paragraphs to be put together. Questions may be asked and answered orally or in writing, in English or in the native language. They may be embedded in the text, printed above, beside or below the text, or provided on a separate sheet. Teachers may provide correct answers immediately, invite answers from other students, have students compare answers, suggest that students read the text again or provide helpful hints.

Students take notes

Having students take notes helps direct their attention to the main points. Notes may be taken in English or the native language, and help may be provided in the form of outlines. Students can later be asked to compare their notes, report them to the whole class or use them to write a summary of the text.

Students translate the text.

Lewitt (1989) points out two problems with this procedure: "the students are bored stiff" and translations "concentrate by necessity only on surface features of meaning". One could add that students trained exclusively in linear decoding tend to read slowly, paying equal attention to every word and little attention to context: in short, they are usually very inefficient readers. Translation is useful as a procedure for checking comprehension of isolated segments, but is unsatisfactory as a means of processing an entire text in a reading class.

facilitating comprehension

Students may indicate in the course of their reading or when the teacher is check-ing their comprehension that they have problems with the text. At such times, any of the following procedures may be appropriate. We should bear in mind, however, that the teacher's job is to help students solve their own comprehension problems, not to solve their problems for them.

The teacher simplifies.

This usually involves oral restatement, using simpler syntax and familiar lexis. This approach encourages students to think in English and reinforces language they have already learned.

The teacher guides.

It is often possible for the teacher to guide the student through difficult segments with questions, hints or suggestions. A sentence which is structurally complex and de-nse may be made accessible to a student by writing parallel but simpler sentences on the blackboard.

The teacher explains.

This generally involves re-ordering information in the text or adding further in-formation in order to clarify the meaning. Examples, illustrations and diagrams are often helpful. Explanation is often necessary when dealing with inferences, implica-

tions, irony and interpretations.

The teacher translates.

When a segment cannot be simplified without changing its meaning and explanation would be too time-consuming and tedious, a simple translation may be the most effective procedure for a class with a common native language. This procedure should not be used indiscriminately, however, for reasons already discussed.

Students refer to a gloss.

It is helpful to provide a gloss of important words, the meaning of which cannot be guessed from the context. This may be in simple English or in the native language.

After reading

Procedures for use after reading a text cover a wide range of skills and objectives. Suggestions for interesting after-reading activities are provided in a number of resource books for teachers, such as Maley (1995), Holme (1991) and Grundy (1993). Another useful source is Goh (1994).

Students summarize the text.

This can be done from memory or from notes taken while reading. In the case of a long text, students may need to skim each paragraph again in order to summarize it. Summaries may be written or oral, in English or in the native language. Students may instead be given a summary with blanks to fill in or errors to correct.

Students compare several texts.

Students are given several texts with a common theme and asked to find similarities or differences between them. This could range from simple contextual differences to comparisons of style, culture, male and female viewpoints, and so on. Maley (1994) offers a number of interesting activities involving comparison.

Students match texts with titles, pictures, etc.

There are many interesting activities of this kind. One common procedure is to give students excerpts from various newspaper articles and a separate collection of headlines and ask students to match the articles with their headlines. Another involves mixing up letters to advice columns and replies and having students match up each letter with a reply.

Students resequence scrambled texts.

In its simplest form, this involves taking the sentences of a short story, changing the order and then having students put them back in sequence. With a longer text, the sequence of paragraphs can be jumbled. A more sophisticated task involves gathering and resequencing sentences or paragraphs from two or more jumbled stories.

practising reading skills

Further practice with specific reading skills can be based on the text (e.g. underline all pronouns and identify their referents) or on separate exercises, such as those to be found in Grellet (1981). Nuttall (1982) and Mikulecky and Jeffries (1986).

practising other language skills

Once students have read and understood the text, they can use it as a basis for discussion, composition, role plays, and so on.

discussion

The following types of question are particularly useful for promoting discussion.

i. analytical e.g. Why do you think the hero acted as he did?

ii. affective e.g. How do you feel about what you have just read?

iii. associative e.g. What experiences or other reading passages does this text remind you of?

iv. hypothetical e.g. What would have happened if ...? What would you have done if ...?

v. predictive e.g. What do you imagine happened next?

vi. critical e.g. What should the hero have done when ...?

vii. remedial e.g. What should be done about this problem?

viii. evaluative e.g. What do you like and dislike about this story?

composition

Composition assignments might include reviews of the book or excerpt studied, essays on related themes, letters that the characters in the text might have written, and so on. They could also include transformation tasks based on the text studied. For example, stories can often be transformed into dialogues and then acted out and poems can be transformed to prose. Sometimes a change in context can generate a new story (e.g. a different location or era).

jigsaw reading

This is a series of procedures at the while-reading and after-reading stages which is designed to stimulate information exchange. First, students are divided into groups,

each working with a separate text or a separate segment of the text. After reading the text, answering comprehension check questions and comparing answers, students form new groups, each consisting of one member from the original groups. They then explain their text to the group. In the most sophisticated version of this activity, there is a problem which can only be solved by combining information from all of the texts. A variety of reading jigsaw activities and suggestions on how to use them can be found in Hadfield and Hadfield (1995).

Conclusion

In order to teach EFL reading effectively, teachers need to be familiar with a wide range of procedures at each of the three stages. While the above taxonomy is by no means comprehensive, it will hopefully provide a framework for further expansion.

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