

Opportunities Teachers' Room

Helping Students to Read More Effectively

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Synopsis

Students usually have a variety of reading texts and tasks to perform in the classroom. But often these involve 'testing' not 'teaching'. This article offers strategies and solutions to the common problems faced by teachers when teaching reading, and dealing with reading texts. It looks at motivation and reading strategies that students have in their native language, and looks at how these can be employed when reading in English, such as prediction. The article goes on to look at different types of texts and ways of reading and ways of dealing with unknown vocabulary and grammar.

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1 Teaching Reading

Traditionally, in the language classroom students have been given plenty of reading to do and tasks to perform. All too often though, reading activities involve testing rather than teaching: 'it is often remarked that a great deal of testing of reading goes on but little teaching (Alderson and Urquhart 1984 p. 83). Because learners are not actually taught how to read, they are likely to have the same kind of problems again and again when reading.

What learners need therefore is to be equipped with the awareness or the strategies to overcome the obstacles that they face when reading, such as lack of language. Learners frequently have problems because they do not really understand what is involved in reading: 'novice readers often act inappropriately because they do not yet have the necessary understanding of the reading process to control their own activities while reading for different purposes' (Brown, Armbruster and Baker 1986 p.50.). Students tend to see reading as the mere transmission of ideas, rather than a process which involves working things out for themselves and creating their own meaning from texts.

As a result, learners often do not see the purpose of reading and panic when they do not understand everything. 'Unassisted, many students learn strategies that impede their obtaining meaning efficiently from printed texts.' Hosenfield p.243 1984). For example, when they come across difficulties while reading many learners resort to such unsuitable strategies as translating or making wild guesses about the text.

What we need to try to help learners develop is a repertoire of strategies which they can call upon when needed, because 'good learners ... tend to use the same strategies as experienced readers,

drawing on as much of the surrounding text as possible, being prepared to tolerate uncertainty, using a wide range of textual cues in predicting what comes next, and generally being flexible in their response to text' (Wallace 1991 p.59). This flexibility is also crucial (Harri-Augstein and Thomas 1984), as it enables learners to employ the right strategies to overcome reading difficulties.

2 Motivation

Firstly, we need to activate learners' motivation to read in English, to make them realise that reading can be both useful and fun.

Activity 1 - Reasons for reading in English

Which of these things have you read? Which of these things would you like to be able to read in the future?

- 1 Instructions for how to use a machine (like a video).
- 2 Instructions for a computer game.
- 3 Books about a subject you are studying.
- 4 A letter from a penfriend.
- 5 Signs and notices when you go abroad.
- 6 Things written in English on the Internet.
- 7 Things in English in advertisements ('Just do it!')
- 8 Magazines about something you are very interested in. (e.g. motorbikes)
- 9 The label on an article of clothing you have bought.
- 10 A job application offering a fantastic job.
- 11 A love letter from a good-looking foreigner.
- 12 Graffiti written on walls.
- 13 The credits after a film (e.g. Executive Producer Stephen Spielberg)
- 14 Lyrics of songs that you like.
- 15 Menus when you go abroad.
- 16 Ingredients on food products.
- 17 An important business fax.
- 18 Labels on products.
- 19 A postcard from another good-looking foreigner.
- 20 Your horoscope in a magazine.

The amount of reading in English that students have done will depend on their age and their social background. Students from wealthier backgrounds are more likely to have travelled abroad and for instance to have used English with computers. However, even if students have not read much they will probably have done something, such as tried to understand the lyrics of a song. The main aim of such an activity is

also to get learners thinking about what kind of reading they might like to do in the future and how this might be important not only for passing exams but for their work and their personal life (e.g. reading love letters from good-looking foreigners!).

3 Awareness of Reading

The next step in terms of reading awareness is to get students thinking about **how** they read in their own language, to realise that in fact we do very different kinds of reading according to the purpose that we have.

Activity 2 - Reading in your own language

What kind of reading do you do in the situations below in **your** language?

- a** read it very quickly to find out what it is about
- b** read it to get specific information that you want to know
- c** read something in more detail

- 1 You read some instructions on how to use a gas cooker. You are a bit worried as you have heard about a lot of accidents with gas.
- 2 You visit a library because you want to find out information for a particular topic for a project at school. You quickly look through books and articles to find out if they are worth borrowing to use for your project.
- 3 You are on holiday and sit down to read the latest thriller by your favourite writer. There is no pressure on you to finish it.
- 4 While waiting for a dentist's appointment, you pick up a magazine and see that it is very interesting. You have not got time to read all of it, but you look through it to get as much information as you can.

(Adapted from Parrot *Tasks for Language Teachers* OUP 1993)

While discussing the activity above it is vital to point out that we normally do not read to understand everything, we skim or scan in all kinds of situations (e.g. 2/4). The same will be true of reading in English and when students read texts they will often only have to get the general idea or find out very specific information. We only read more intensively in situations like 1, where the information is very important, or when we have got lots of time and we are reading to

enjoy ourselves (3). It is also worth mentioning that in fact when reading for pleasure we often read without a lot of detail, because we are so interested in finding out what happens in the end!

Along with task awareness comes text awareness. As pointed out above, the objective is to develop flexibility in terms of students' reactions to texts, along with the awareness that some texts are more difficult than others. In the same way as for listening, if learners have problems with texts it is not because they are suddenly worse but because the text is more difficult than others they have seen.

The 'readability' of texts is hard to predict and it is certainly not just a matter of difficult or new language. There are many other factors that make texts difficult, not least the kind of motivation or interest that students bring to them.

Activity 3 - Difficult and easy reading

- 1 Which of these are easy and which are difficult for you to do in your own language?
- a** Reading about topics that you know a lot about.
 - b** Reading something which has a lot of pictures to go with it.
 - c** Reading when you have a dictionary to help you with difficult words.
 - d** Reading something that is quite short.
 - e** Reading something with very small print.
 - f** Reading something you are not interested in but you **have to** read for school.
 - g** Reading things you are really interested in (e.g. the lyrics of one of your favourite songs).
 - h** Something about a subject you do not understand.
 - i** Reading something with a lot of diagrams and graphs.

2 Which of the kinds of reading above are easiest for you to do in English?

When going over the activity above the easiest things for students in their own languages as well as in English will probably be **a**, **b**, **d** and **g**. Reading with a dictionary will be easier (particularly in English) and texts with diagrams and graphs will be easier for students who are technically or mathematically-minded.

Another important technique to increase students' text awareness and at the same time boost their confidence is to make them realise the

large numbers of words in English which often have cognates in other languages (especially Latin languages).

Activity 4 - Using words you know

Read the text below. Underline words that are similar in your language.

The Natural History Museum London

In the dinosaur gallery of the museum there is an incredible selection of dinosaur skeletons on show. There are also fascinating exhibits about the dinosaur's way of life.

Dinosaurs lived on Earth for about 160 million years, before the first humans appeared. In the exhibition you can see fossils of many different types of dinosaurs from many different parts of the world, including Britain. Recent expeditions are still discovering astonishing new species.

The only direct evidence we have of what dinosaurs were like comes from the fossils that we are lucky enough to find. Skeletons are rarely found complete and it is difficult to piece together the fragments to reconstruct a whole animal.

(Adapted from: The Natural History Museum p. 4 (1989) Natural History Museum Publications)

How many words are similar in your language?

With pre-intermediate students and above, cross-cultural awareness can be worked on. The different kinds of texts which can be seen in the language classroom can be identified, as can their readership. Then, cultural differences between certain text types in English and a student's own language can be focused on, such as ways of beginning a text or the kind of greetings used.

Activity 5 - Text Types

1 Which of these places do the texts below come from?

- a** a newspaper **b** a formal letter **c** lyrics of a song **d** an advertisement
e a letter to a friend **f** a fairy story

2 Who do you think would read the texts below?

Example **a** (newspaper article) = someone interested in sport

1
HOOLIGANS RUIN CUP FINAL

2 Once upon a time there was a princess

3 PURE SUNSHINE

4
Dear Sir/Madam,
I am writing to you for information about your summer courses in
Ireland.

5
Come on baby, please don't go.
I love you, I love you so.

6
Hi Jasper,
How are you getting on? I'm...

3 How would the texts above be different in your language?

4 Prediction Strategies

As well as heightening students' awareness of reading in both their own language and in English, it is also important to provide them with a repertoire of strategies so that they can deal with reading problems when they arise. It is not enough to carefully stage reading lessons. We also must make students aware of the strategies that they are using, so that when they come to deal with texts on their own they are capable of employing them.

As for listening, one of the most important area of strategies is that of prediction: activating existing knowledge, making guesses and prediction about texts, and generating real and individual reasons for reading. Pictures can be used before reading in the same way as for listening. Students can use pictures to brainstorm what they know about a topic, to guess what the text will be about or to make guesses about the characters in the text.

Another very useful way of getting students to predict is to work out where a text is from and why people would want to read it. In the same way that it is important to establish a clear context for listening activities on cassette, it is important to get learners to identify the social and communicative purpose of the text they are going to read.

Titles and questions about the reading text can be used in the same way as for listening. However, magazine and newspaper headlines are particularly useful for prediction as they are designed to convey a lot of information about the text in a very concise way (see Activity 6 below)

Activity 6 - Headlines

1 Look at the headlines below. In groups, guess what the stories are about.

SHEEP PIG WINS PRIZE SHOCK DEFEAT FOR UNITED
TYRANNOSAURUS IN MY BACK GARDEN

2 Read the texts and match them with the headlines.

Mr Adam Symons of 22, Mill St, Ludlow Curly, a pig from Malmesbury discovered the bone of a dinosaur, while won 1st prize at the National digging in his back garden. He told .. Sheepdog Trials, held in Banbury yesterday. Farmer, Fred Giles said ...

There was a big surprise in the second round of the FA Cup last night. Shrewsbury Town knocked out the giants Manchester United with a last minute penalty. United manager K.Thribb said...

For another activity using headlines see: *Headstarts* p.73 (1991) Natalie Hess.

Another useful prediction strategy is making guesses about the subject of a text by reading the beginning and the end of it. For factual articles and for books on academic subjects this can be a very quick way of working out if something is worth reading (see Activity 7 below).

Activity 7 - Close the Gap

1 In groups, look at the beginning and the ending of the story.

Once upon a time there was a young girl called Samantha. Her mother and father wanted Sammy to work in their supermarket but she ...

Sammy and Karen went on a tour of the U.S. and had sell-out concerts everywhere. When Sammy came back to Britain her mother was waiting for her at the airport.

What do you think happens in the middle?

a Think of ideas (one person writes them down).

Example: Sammy joined a pop group.

b Write a summary of your story.

2 Read the story that your group has written out to the rest of the class.

3 Now read the story and compare it with your own.

Idea from: *Headstarts* p.13 (1991) Natalie Hess (This book is full of ideas for developing prediction strategies with your students.)

The complete version for students to compare their own stories is as follows:

Once upon a time there was a young girl called Samantha. Her mother and father wanted Sammy to work in their supermarket but she hated the idea. She loved music and taught herself to play the guitar in her bedroom. Then she formed a group with three friends from school. Sammy was the lead vocalist and bass guitarist.

That summer the group, which they called *Wolverines*, played in the school concert and they were a great success. At weekends the group started to play at parties. Sammy's parents did not approve of this, but they thought she would 'grow out of' her obsession with music.

One day, just before her final exams at school, Sammy decided to give up studying. Her parents were absolutely furious and her father told her to leave home. She was very upset but she was determined to make music her life. She moved into a 'squat' in the centre of the city. The squat was a deserted house occupied by some young people.

The first few months were very difficult. Sammy played in the street to get money to live. One day the police came and evicted her and her friends from the squat. Then, one morning when she was playing in the street a girl stopped to listen. They started talking and soon they

were friends. Karen had studied classical music and was a brilliant piano player. Together they started to write their own songs.

They formed a duo called 'The Harpies' and started to play in clubs. Then, one night, after they had finished, they saw an enormous limousine waiting outside the club.

A man smoking an enormous cigar called them over and said; 'OK girls, you're great. You're going to be famous. Chip Greenbaum's the name.'

They started work on their first record and spent several weeks in the studio. The next thing they knew, their record was number one in the British and American charts. They had made it! Sammy and Karen went on a tour of the U.S. and had sell-out concerts everywhere. When Sammy came back to Britain her mother was waiting for her at the airport.

Another way of activating students' background knowledge as well as their interest is using tasks that are generated by students themselves. Learners work out questions that they want to ask about a text, then read it and see how much information they can find out. This kind of task sheet can be particularly useful when doing project work. Not only can students be focused in their information gathering (which reduces the risk of copying information directly) but can practise valuable reference and 'book handling' skills.

4 Extensive Reading Strategies

As well as developing prediction strategies it is important to work on strategies that students can use **while** reading texts. As mentioned earlier, many learners often try to use inappropriate styles of reading, trying to understand texts in detail when gist reading or scanning is required.

As well as giving plenty of practice in extensive reading, it is useful to get students to reflect on how they actually go about doing it, how long a very extensive task takes and how much they need to understand to actually do the task (see the activities below). This can help to wean students from the habit of 'diving into' texts and trying to understand everything and make them realise that they often only need to understand a very small part of the text.

Activity 8 - Reading to get the general idea

1 Read the text below and find out which of these things it is about.

- a** the history of North America
- b** the history of Indians and India
- c** the history of Indians in America

Indians have lived in North America for thousands of years. Their ancestors came from Siberia, in Russia, over 20,000 years ago. They followed big game such as woolly mammoth and buffalo, crossing the shallow Bering Strait, which became a land bridge during the last Ice Age when the sea level dropped.

Gradually the Indians spread all over North, Central and South America and divided into different groups, or tribes, each of which developed distinct ways of life depending upon their environment.

In the far north lived the Inuit, who hunted seal, walrus, and polar bear. They travelled in boats made of stretched skin, called kayaks, and made snow houses for shelter while hunting.

On the damp, wooded Pacific coast, food, especially fish, was plentiful. The tribes there had time to develop arts and crafts and were renowned for their wood carving - in particular their totem poles.

Some Indians in the warm, dry south-west became settled farmers and grew corn, beans and squash. They lived in towns, called Pueblos, in several storied houses built of mud and straw bricks.

In the heart of America, where there were great, flat windswept grasslands, lived the Plains Indians. They were nomadic groups, constantly travelling in search of immense herds of buffalo which once roamed this land.

(From: *Indians of the Plains* p.5 Ruth Thomlinson 1991 Franklin Watts)

2 Answer these questions about your reading.

- a** How long did it take you to answer the question?
 - b** How many key words did you need to understand to answer the question? (e.g. Indians)
 - c** How much of the text did you need to understand?
a= 100% b= 50% c= 10%
-

The same text can be used to practise reading for specific information, as in the activity below.

Activity 9 - Reading for information

1 Read the text in Activity 8 again and complete this information.

Where they came from: When they went to America:	Siberia in Russia 18,000 BC
Where Inuit moved to: What they ate: How they travelled: Where they lived:	
Where the Plains Indians moved to: Where they lived: What they hunted:	

2 Answer these questions about HOW you read.

- a How long did it take you to get the information?
 - b Which parts of the text did you not need to read?
 - c What did you do when you did not know a word?
 - 1 I ignored it because it was not important.
 - 2 I tried to guess the meaning of it.
 - 3 I looked it up in my dictionary.
- 3 How did you feel when you did not understand words?
- 1 Nervous. I needed to translate all of them.
 - 2 Relaxed. I could ignore them and still get the information.

In the first activity above even weaker students should take a couple of minutes at most to find out what the text is about. The words they need to understand are: Indians ... North ... Central ... South ... America. To do the task they need to understand much less than 10% of the text.

In Activity 9 above students need to read in much more detail and there is quite a bit of information to collect. However, there are parts

that they do not need to read at all (the two introductory paragraphs and those about the Pacific and Pueblo Indians).

There are key words that they do need to understand in the text (e.g. hunt / seal / walrus / travel / plains). However, many of these can be guessed from the context (e.g. seal and walrus) and only a very few need looking up. A very important strategy is actually ignoring words that are not essential and being relaxed about it. This tolerance of ambiguity is probably easier to develop amongst younger students who are used not to understanding everything in their own language and who have not been taught to try to understand everything when they read.

6 Intensive Reading

As well as developing extensive reading strategies, it is important to get students to react to texts as individuals and to relate texts to their own preferences and experiences (see Activity below related to the text above in Activity 8).

Activity 10 - Open reading

Read the text about American Indians and answer the questions.

- 1 What have YOU learnt about American Indians?
 - 2 Which group of Indians (Inuit/Pacific coast Indians/Pueblo Indians/Plains Indians) do YOU find most interesting?
 - 3 Which of the areas of America mentioned would YOU like to visit?
 - 4 Have you seen any documentaries or films about the peoples mentioned?
 - 5 Do you think that things improved or got worse when the Europeans arrived in America?
-

As well as being useful for mixed ability classes, because there are no right or wrong answers, 'open' questions encourage students to become involved in what they are reading. Strategies for very intensive reading also involve those strategies mentioned already, such as prediction and gist reading. Even if the task which has been set involves more intensive reading, it is important for students not to start off by reading intensively.

After making predictions about the text learners should read extensively first to get the general idea, ignoring words that they do not know for the moment and reacting to the text. Then, they should re-read a second or third time for more in-depth understanding. When this is being done students can try to guess the meaning of key words, those which are vital to understanding the text. Finally, they should look at the task and try to complete it (see Activity 11 below).

Activity 11 - Reading for detail

1 In which order would you do these things when you are reading a short text for detail?

Example: 1 = b

- a The first time you read the text, ignore words you don't know and concentrate on getting the main idea.
- b Before reading try to predict what the text will be about and the kind of words that you are likely to see.
- c Finally, look at the questions and go back to the text to answer them.
- d This time identify key words that you do not understand (if you can write on the page underline or highlight them).
- e When you are reading for the second time, try to understand in more detail.
- f Try to guess the meaning of these key words. Ignore words that are not so important.

7 Word Handling

While it is important to get students to use dictionaries, they should first try to guess the meaning of words, using a series of contextual

and structural clues provided by the text. If this fails, then they can resort to their dictionary to find out the meaning of the word.

Activity 12 - Guessing the meaning of words

Use the strategies below to guess the meaning of words in the text.

Alice knew that it was going to be a **difficult decision** to make. Should she stay on the wall? It was at least 2 metres high. Maybe she would have to wait hours, and that would be very unpleasant. In the end she **jumped off** it and **landed** on the ground. She then got up and decided to **amble** slowly to the palace and see the Queen.

1 Re-read the sentence or surrounding sentences to get ideas about the

meaning of the words:

jumped off and landed =

2 Relate the form of the word to a word in your own language to help you

with meaning.

difficult decision =

3 Use the different parts of words to help you work out meaning

unpleasant = opposite of pleasant

4 Work out the part of speech (noun/verb/adjective, etc) to help you guess the meaning of a key word.

She ... decided to **amble** slowly to the palace.

Answers

1 She was sitting on a wall - she did not want to stay there – therefore

she left the wall and she **came** to the ground.

2 difficult decision = 'decisión difícil'

3 pleasant = nice/good - therefore unpleasant = not nice

4 verb in past tense - verb of movement = to go slowly

One way of practising the guessing of meaning from context as well as prediction is by using half-completed sentences in a story.

Example

She got home late at night and looked in the fridge. 'Aaaaaaah!' she screamed. There was a

Another way is by using nonsense words, words that have no meaning but substitute other words (see Activity 13 below). Having done activities like this you can get students themselves to work out their own nonsense word activities for other groups to do.

Activity 13 - Nonsense words

Guess the meaning of the words below.

Example 1 **gloffling** = starring

- 1 Yesterday, my sister and I saw a horror film, **gloffling** Brad Pitt, Sandra Bullock and Jack Nicholson. It was all about a vampire (Jack Nicholson) who lived in London.
- 2 During the film I was very **zarblous** and had to close my eyes.
- 3 After the film we went for a coffee and talked about it. My sister thought Brad Pitt was **sperrific** but that the film was not very **berunging**, because it was for children.
- 4 On the way home I saw a man on the bus. He was exactly the same as
the vampire in the film, with **bleffy** eyes and two **troony** teeth.
- 5 When we got off the bus the man **willowed** us along our street. My sister was very **yarooed** and we ran home!

Possible Answers

2- zarblous = nervous 3- sperrific = fantastic berunging = exciting 4- bleffy = strange / red troony = large/pointed 5- willowed = followed yarooed = frightened

It is also important to train students in the use of dictionaries while they are reading, as well as through dictionary games. After doing a reading task you can ask students how many words they looked up. Then you can write the words on the blackboard and see if it would have been possible to guess the meaning of these words from the context or from other clues.

One of the biggest problems for students when using dictionaries is the existence of two or more different definitions for a particular word. In this case it is important for students to use the context and the form of the word to guess the correct one (see activity below).

Activity 14 - Choosing the right definition

Read the sentences and choose the correct definition below.

Example 1 = b (a machine to move air)

- 1 I need a **fan**, because it is so hot in here.
- 2 These shoes really **suit** me.
- 3 There are no apples **left** in the fridge.
- 4 Near the top of the mountain there is a beautiful **spring**.
- 5 I took a **pack** of cards with me on holiday.

fan n. a) a supporter b) a machine to move air

suit n. a) a set of clothes v. b) to fit, to be suitable

left adj. a) on the left side of the body b) remaining

spring n. a) a place where water comes naturally to the ground

v. b) to jump c) the season between winter and summer

pack v. a) to put things into boxes b) a number of things together

c) a set of cards

8 Handling Information

In the same way as for listening, note-taking and dealing with the information when reading is another important strategy. This can be developed through guided note-taking activities, where students have to complete notes in the form of tables, diagrams and networks. However, it is also important for learners to develop their own method of taking notes.

After discussion of different note-taking techniques, students can be given a reading text with no specific task but to take notes on it, in order to summarise the most important points in it. Having talked about the content of the text and the main points (which will vary according to the interests of each student), the methods that were used for note-taking can be discussed and ideas exchanged. Note-taking is a very personal affair and each student must look for a style that suits him/her as an individual.

One method suitable for dealing with content, is the use of text flow charts. These can be useful as they help students to grasp the overall

structure of texts and thus make the information more logical and easier to digest.

Flow charts are also extremely interesting in terms of text awareness, as they allow contrastive work on rhetorical organisation, comparing the structure of the English text with that of similar texts in the students' own language (for reading on contrastive rhetoric see Kaplan 1986, Purves 1988). Some text types lend themselves to this more than others as they tend to have very specific text structure, e.g. formal letters, brochures, instructions, and certain expository texts (see Activity 15 below).

Activity 15 - Text flow charts

1 Read the text below and match the descriptions with the boxes.

- a** This paragraph lists the action that needs to be taken.
- b** This paragraph lists the consequences of the present situation.
- c** This paragraph gives reason for writing and explains the situation.

Letter to a newspaper

first paragraph
second paragraph
third paragraph

2 Read the text again and take notes about

- a** the situation
- b** the consequences of it
- c** the action that needs to be taken

<p>The Editor, The Alborough Herald, 11 High Street, Alborough</p> <p>Dear Sir/Madam,</p>	<p>45 Newmarket Road, Homerton, Near Alborough, 25th March</p>
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I am writing to you as chairwoman of Homerton Parish Council, about the Greenfields rubbish incinerator. For the last three weeks black smoke has been coming from incinerator chimney and we believe this has had various negative effects on our village.

Firstly, two or three children from a local playgroup and from the village school have been suffering from asthma and bronchitis. One pensioner has also been taken to hospital for the same reason. In addition, numbers of dead birds have been found in the fields and countryside around the incinerator.

I complained two weeks ago to our local MP, but nothing has been done. We have reported the problem to the local health inspector and we are planning demonstrations every day outside the incinerator, until it is closed down. We are also calling a public meeting to discuss the subject at Homerton Village Hall on Friday 28th March.

Yours faithfully,

Brenda Castlemaine

9 Analysing Texts

At the same time, many texts have cultural references which can make them difficult for students to understand. It is interesting to relate and compare British, American, or other English-speaking sociocultural contexts with students' own environments, so that they can understand them, at the same time as increasing their general awareness of the target culture (see Activity below- related to the text above).

Activity 16 - Cultural references

Read the letter about the incinerator again. Could something like this happen in YOUR area? Answer these questions about the text.

- 1 How big do you think the village is?
- 2 What is a playgroup?
- 3 What are the equivalent of these things in your country?
village school / pensioner/parish council / village hall / health inspector
- 4 Who is the local 'MP'? Who would YOU complain to if there were a similar problem in your area?

A final strategy which can help students when they are reading for detail is looking out for cohesive devices within the text, which can act as signposts that facilitate understanding:

- * discourse markers: then, next, but, although, etc
- * anaphoric reference (referring back in a text) through pronouns/articles: e.g. 'Katy left the house. **She** knew that someone was following **her**.'
- * cataphoric reference (referring forward in a text): e.g. '**Suddenly**, the sun came out.'
- * lexical linking (using synonyms or near synonyms): e.g. 'There was an **old man** asleep in the bus. The **elderly gentleman** looked sad, even in his sleep.'

The features of discourse listed above need systematic language work which should be graded according to the language level of the students, beginning with coordinators such as 'and' and 'but' and then moving on to more complex elements. However, there are also ways of increasing students' general awareness of textual cohesion. One is by asking students after reading which words acted as 'flags' or signposts in the text to help them understand.

Activity 17 - Reference

Read the text and answer the questions below.

1 Three people were killed and two injured in a crash on the A49 last Saturday. A lorry
 2 carrying chickens went out of control just outside the village of Brimfield. **The lorry**
 3 crashed into two cars, before **it** went off **the road** into a field. After that the two cars
 4 caught fire and the people in **one of the cars** were unable to escape. **The occupants** of
 5 the **other car** managed to get out, before **their vehicle** exploded. **They** then rang the
 6 police and the fire brigade but it took **them** twenty minutes to get **there**. Later a police
 7 spokesperson said ...

1 What do these pronouns refer to? Example: **a** = the lorry

a it (line 3) **b** their (line 5) **c** they (line 5) **d** them (line 6)

2 Match these words in the text.

1 the road

2 the car

a the people in the car

b the lorry

breathe. This oxygen is made by the plants and trees in our planet. However, because we are destroying the forests of the Earth, we are reducing the capacity to produce oxygen.

2 Jamie left the hotel and walked to the park. Because it was winter, there were very few people there. After a few minutes he decided to go for a coffee. When he was having his coffee he met an old friend, Bill. They talked for an hour and then decided to go out for dinner.

(This activity has been adapted from one of the same name using song lyrics in: *Alternatives* p.34 (1990) Baudains,R. and Baudains,M. Longman)

10 Self-assessment and Self-study

As well as developing reading strategies it is vital to encourage students to work individually and to monitor their own progress and performance. Initial self-assessment is difficult to do right at the beginning of the course, as students need to refer to specific reading that they have done (and over the summer they may have done very little in English!). One way of getting students to reflect on their reading at the start of a year is by getting them to read a text and then assess how much they understood and what problems they had.

Reading programmes can also be set up in the English language classroom, where students start to read on their own. Authentic texts such as song lyrics and stories, or graded readers can be used in a reading programme (see Ellis, McCrae 1990). Students can be given time for reading on their own, either for homework or in the class. Class libraries can be established if each student buys one graded reader or magazine which can be read by the other students in the class.

One of the best things about reading programmes is that they can be completely individualised, with each student working at his/her own pace and level. Strategies for extensive reading can be discussed and students can be given individual guidance by the teacher. The most important thing is for students to read things that they are interested in, regardless of level. These could be the lyrics of their favourite pop groups, stories that they have already read in their own language or magazines about their favourite hobby.

If students are given class time to do this reading it will give you an opportunity to monitor what is happening and give help where necessary. Students can also be asked to complete record forms when

they have finished, which can act as a kind of reading diary (see Activity 19 below).

Activity 19 - Pupil Record Cards

Title/ author	date borrowed /returned	type of book	problems	useful vocab	comments
Batman	12/5 01/6	fiction	a few difficult words	fly/laser /joker	exciting with lots of action good pictures

(adapted from p. 19 *The Extensive Reading Handbook for Secondary Teachers* Ellis,G. McRae,J. (1991) Penguin)

It is also possible to use standard reading tasks for readers with stories, instead of the record cards suggested above. These involve answering more detailed questions about the reader and then handing in their task sheet to the teacher. It is important to keep copies of these or keep them yourself as it is very easy for students to copy. For more ideas about standard reading tasks that can be used with all kinds of texts, see Dickinson 1987 p. 170.

Activity 20 - Reader task sheet

Answer the questions below about the reader you have just finished.

1 Did you like the story? Why/why not?

2 Who was your favourite character in the story? Why?

3 What happened in the story? List five of the most important events.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

5 _____

4 Did you like the ending to the story? How could it be different?

Class readers can also be used with the whole class. Reading the book yourself and getting students to read and follow has been discredited for a long time, but there is evidence that it is positive for both first and second language learners (Amer, A. 1997). Class readers are certainly good for developing prediction strategies, involving students with stories and developing students' ability to react and interpret the content of the text (Amer 1997 p. 44).

Questions on the class reader can be done informally, either before starting to read or when you have been reading for five or ten minutes. Answers can then be discussed with the class.

Activity 21 - Listening and reading

Answer these questions about the reader.

- 1 Where are we in the story? What has just happened?
- 2 Where is the action taking place? How do you imagine it?
- 3 How do you think the main character feels at this point in the story?
Why?
- 4 What does the main character want to do next?
- 5 What do you think will happen next?

In addition, from time to time students can be asked to reflect on their reading performance with a shorter text that is part of the coursework, assessing their own performance and evaluating the text. This kind of activity gets students to think about how well they have done and why the text was difficult or easy (see Activity 22 below).

Activity 22 - Self-assessment of reading performance

1 How well did you do the task?

very well	quite well	O.K.	not very well	badly
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2 Evaluate the task in terms of difficulty.

easy	OK	difficult
------	----	-----------

3 Evaluate the text in terms of difficulty

a It was

very long	OK	very short
-----------	----	------------

b The print was

small and difficult to read	no problems	very large and a bit childish
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c There were

no pictures to help me	a few pictures	lots of pictures
------------------------	----------------	------------------

d I knew

nothing about the topic before	something about the topic before	a lot about the topic before
--------------------------------	----------------------------------	------------------------------

e There were

a lot of new words for me	quite a few new words	very few new words
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In the same way as for other skills, self-assessment of progress needs to be done periodically. Students can look back and reflect on the reading they have done and think about the strategies that they have used successfully. They can also think about how much progress they have made over the period of time.

Activity 23 - Self-assessment of reading progress

Rank the reading you have done in order of difficulty for you. (1 = the most difficult.)

- a the story about Gulliver.
 - b the instructions on how to make a chocolate cake.
 - c the letter from Mohammed.
 - d the story of the Dreamy Dragon.
 - e the lyrics of the song you chose.
 - f other reading you have done on your own.
-
-

Which of these strategies were useful?

- a Thinking about the topic before reading.
 - b Using pictures to predict information.
 - c Predicting the answers to questions.
 - d Trying to get the general idea the first time.
 - e Ignoring words I didn't know.
 - f Reading a second time in more detail.
 - g Guessing the meaning of important words.
 - h Using my dictionary to look up words.
 - i Taking notes.
 - j Assessing how much I understood after reading.
 - k Evaluating the text after reading.
-

Students' answers to this reading progress questionnaire can also include the reading that they have done on their own. Questionnaires can be administered at the end of units or at the end of the term, when the self-assessment can be used to involve students in the process of global assessment of progress (see Harris and McCann 1994).

Reflection

- 1 What do your students read in their own language? Speak to their language teacher and find out the kind of reading they do in class. What kind of reading do they do outside class?
- 2 Which of the strategies outlined (prediction, gist reading, guessing meaning of words etc.) do you use when YOU are reading?
- 3 Which of the reading strategies shown in this article would be most useful for your learners?

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