



## UNDERSTANDING READING COMPREHENSION AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of the theme is to study thoroughly and to reveal the to give about receptive skills of the target language and to make conclusions about the reading tasks of English and what are the criteria of this document for reading.*

*The object is to study, analyze and most importantly investigate the process of testing reading and find reading tasks according to the different levels and to study of methods and techniques that are used in assessing reading.*

Receptive skills are the ways in which people extract meaning from the discourse they see or hear. There are generalities about this kind of processing, which apply to both reading and listening, but there are also significant differences between reading and listening processes too, and in the ways we can teach these skills in the classroom. When we read a story or a newspaper, listen to the news, or take part in conversation we employ our previous knowledge as we approach the process of comprehension, and we deploy a range of receptive skills; which ones we use will be determined by our reading or listening purpose.

The teaching and learning of receptive skills presents a number of particular problems, which will need to be addressed. These are to do with language, topic, the tasks students are asked to perform, and the expectations they have of reading and listening. First, we would like to stop on language. In the case of written text, some

researchers 4 look at word and sentence-length, on the premise that texts with longer sentences and longer words will be more difficult to understand than those with shorter ones do. Others, however, claim that the critical issue is quite simply the number of unfamiliar words, which the text contains. If readers and listeners do not know half the words in a text, they will have great difficulty in understanding the text as a whole. To be successful they have to recognize a high proportion of the vocabulary without consciously thinking about it. It is clear that both sentence length and the percentage of unknown words both play their part in a text's comprehensibility.

When students who are engaged in listening encounter unknown lexis it can be 'like a dropped barrier causing them to stop and think about the meaning of a word and thus making them miss the next part of the speech'. Unlike reading, there may be no opportunity to go back and listen to the lexis





again. Comprehension is gradually degraded, therefore, and unless the listener is able to latch on to a new element to help them back into the flow of what is being said the danger is that they will lose heart and gradually disengage from the receptive task since it is just too difficult. We can try to get students to read or listen to such texts, but the only effect this will probably have is to de-motivate them. Apart from the obvious point that the more language we expose students to the more they will learn, there are specific ways of addressing the problem of language difficulty: pre-teaching vocabulary, using extensive reading/listening.

Many receptive skill activities prove less successful than anticipated because the topic is not appropriate or because students are not familiar with the genre, they are dealing with. If students are not interested in a topic, or if they are unfamiliar with the text genre we are asking them to work on, they may be reluctant to engage fully the activity. To resolve such problems we need to think about how we choose and use topics, and how we approach different reading and speaking genres. We should try to choose topics, which our students will be interested in. We can find this out by questionnaires, interviews, or by the reactions of students in both current and previous classes to various activities and topics we have used. For this reason, we need to include a variety of topics across a series of lessons so that all our students' interests will be catered for in the end. We can get students engaged by talking about the topic, by showing a picture for prediction, by asking them to guess what they are going to see or hear because of a few words or phrases from the text, or by having them look at headlines or captions

before they read the whole thing. Perhaps we will show them a picture of someone famous and get them to say if they know anything about that person before they read a text about them or hear them talking. A key feature in the successful teaching of receptive skills concerns the choice of comprehension tasks. Sometimes such tasks appear to be testing the students rather than helping them to understand. Although reading and listening are perfectly proper mediums for language and skill testing, nevertheless, if we are trying to encourage students to improve their receptive skills, testing them will not be an appropriate way of accomplishing this. Sometimes texts and the tasks, which accompany them, are far too easy or far too difficult. In order to resolve these problems we need to use comprehension tasks which promote understanding and we need to match text and task appropriately.

One of the receptive skills is reading. Below we would like to show characteristics of teaching reading to the learners. To get maximum benefit from their reading, students need to be involved in both extensive and intensive reading. Whereas with the former a teacher encourages students to choose for themselves what they read and to do so for pleasure and general language improvement, the latter is often teacher chosen and directed, and is designed to enable students to develop specific receptive skills. Extensive reading materials; one of the fundamental conditions of a successful extensive reading programme is that students should be reading material which they can understand. If they are struggling to understand every word, they can hardly be reading for pleasure - the main goal of this activity. Extensive reading tasks: because





students should be allowed to choose their own reading texts, following their own likes and interests, they will not all be reading the same texts at once. For this reason - and because we want to prompt students to keep reading - we should encourage them to report on their reading in a number of ways.

In order to get students to read enthusiastically in class, we need to work to create interest in the topic and tasks. However, there are further roles we need to adopt when asking students to read intensively. We need to tell students exactly what their reading purpose is, and give them clear instructions about how to achieve it, and how long they have to do this. When we ask students to read on their own we need to give them space to do so. While students are reading, we can observe their progress since this will give us valuable information about how well they are doing individually and collectively. When our students have completed the task, we can lead a feedback session to check that they have completed the task successfully. We may start by having them compare their answers in pairs and then ask for answers from the class in general or from pairs in particular. Students often appreciate giving paired answers like this since, by sharing their knowledge, they are also sharing their responsibility for the answers.

When we ask students to give answers we should always ask them to say where in the text they found the information for their answers. This provokes a detailed study of the text, which will help them the next time they come to a similar reading passage. It also tells us exactly what comprehension problems they have when they get answers wrong.

Another receptive skill is listening. There are many ways of teaching listening

to our learners. Students can improve their listening skills - and gain valuable language input - through a combination of extensive and intensive listening material and procedures. Listening of both kinds is especially important since it provides the perfect opportunity to hear voices other than the teacher's, enables students to acquire good speaking habits as a result of the spoken English they absorb, and helps to improve their own pronunciation. Extensive listening will usually take place outside the classroom, in the students' home, car, or on personal stereos as they travel from one place to another. The motivational power of such an activity increases dramatically when students make their own choices about what they are going to listen to. The keenest students will want to listen to English tapes outside the classroom anyway, and will need little encouragement to do so. Many others, however, will profit from having the teacher give them reasons to make use of the resources available. We need to explain the benefits of listening extensively, and come to some kind of agreement about how much and what kind of listening they should do. We can recommend certain tapes, and get other students to talk about the ones, which they have enjoyed the most.

Many teachers use taped materials, and increasingly material on disk, when they want their students to practice listening skills. This has a number of advantages and disadvantages: Advantages: taped material allows students to hear a variety of different voices apart from just their own teachers. It gives them an opportunity to 'meet' a range of different characters, especially where real people are talking. However, even when tapes contain written dialogues or extracts from plays,





they offer a wide variety of situations and voices. Taped material is extremely portable and readily available. Tapes are extremely cheap, and machines to play them are relatively inexpensive.

For all these reasons most course books include tapes, and many teachers rely on tapes to provide a significant source of language input. Disadvantages can be seen as following: in big classrooms with poor acoustics, the audibility of taped and disk material often gives cause for concern. It is often difficult to ensure that all students in a room can hear equally well. Another problem with classroom tapes is that everyone has to listen at the same speed, a speed dictated by the tape, not by the listeners.

A popular way of ensuring genuine communication is live listening where the teacher and/or visitors to the class talk to the students. This has obvious advantages since students can interrupt speakers and ask for clarification. Live listening can take the following forms:

Reading aloud: an enjoyable activity, when done with conviction and style, is the teacher reading aloud to a class.

Story telling: teachers are ideally placed to tell stories, which, in turn, provide excellent listening material. At any stage of the story, the students can be asked to predict what is coming next, or be asked to describe people in the story or pass comment on it in some other way.

Interviews: one of the most motivating listening activities is the live interview, especially where students themselves dream up the questions. Live listening is not a substitute for audiotapes or disks - in either the classroom, language laboratory, or self-access center - but it does offer an extra dimension to the listening

experience over a series of lessons. As with all activities, for listening we need

To be active in creating student engagement through the way we set up tasks. We need to build up students' confidence by helping them listen better rather than by testing their listening abilities. Listening can occur at a number of points in a teaching sequence. Sometimes it forms the jumping-off point for the activities which follow. Sometimes it may be the first stage of a 'listening and acting out' sequence where students role-play the situation they have heard on the tape. Sometimes live listening may be a prelude to a piece of writing which is the focus of a lesson. Other lessons, however, have listening training as their central focus. Most listening sequences involve a mixture of language skills - though one, in particular, is often the focus of the sequence. Frequently students listen for gist on first hearing before moving on to different task skills; at other times they may listen for specific information straight away. In general, we should aim to use listening material for as many purposes as possible - both for practicing a variety of skills and as source material for other activities - before students finally become tired with it. For example: A popular technique for having students understand the gist of a story—but which also incorporates prediction and the creation of expectations - involves the students in listening so that they can put pictures in the order in which they hear them. They are given a chance, in pairs or groups; to say what they think is happening in each picture. The teacher will not confirm or deny their predictions.

Music is a powerful stimulus for student engagement precisely because it speaks / directly to our emotions while still





allowing us to use our brains to analyze it and it's - effects if we so wish. A piece of music can change the atmosphere in a classroom or prepare students for a new activity. It can amuse and entertain, and it can make a satisfactory connection between the world of leisure and the world of learning. Because the appreciation of music is not a complex skill, and because many different patterns of music from a variety of cultures have become popular all over the globe through satellite television and the Internet, most students have little trouble perceiving clear changes of mood and style. In class, therefore, we can play film music and get students to say what kind of film they think it comes from. We can get them to listen to music, which describes people, and say what kind of people they are. They can write stories based on the mood of the music they hear, or listen to more than one piece of music and discuss with each other what mood the music describes, what 'color' it is, where they would like to hear it, and who with. One of the most useful kinds of text for students to work with is song lyrics, especially where the song in question is one, which the students are very keen on. The teacher can then take the students through the lyrics, explaining phrases they did not understand, asking questions to check their comprehension of various words and expressions e.g. It figures, sneaking up on you, everything blows up in your face. Although this kind of text study is somewhat cumbersome, a detailed look at song lyrics, if the students are interested in them, will really help some of them to remember some of the expressions, especially when they are combined with catchy music. There are many other ways of using song's lyrics, of course. Teachers can give students lyrics with various words blanked out; the teacher

can give students a list of words and ask them to listen to the song to see which of the words are used. The teacher can ask students to put lines in order, or complete half-finished lines. Alternatively, the teacher can simply have students listen to a song and say, what they think the title might be - or say where they would most like to hear it.

Developing receptive skills can be particularly challenging especially when communicating with a fluent or native speaker. Although starting a conversation may be done with relative ease, maintaining one poses greater challenges. Most likely learners may not recognize features of connected speech or idiomatic language, which may lead to an unsuccessful interaction.

Similarly, with reading, if the language or grammar is too complicated it makes the text unintelligible. The key difference between listening and reading is that when learners listen to information, they have much less support than when they are working with the written word on the page. Listening requires 'real-time' processing of language, and once the message has finished, there is no easy way to go back and check for meaning, as there is during reading.

The best way to improve receptive skills is from exposure whether from an enjoyable authentic text or a quality ESL textbook. For example, television, music, books and magazines are great ways to build vocabulary while incidentally promoting learner autonomy. Course books can provide a basic scaffold and are adapted for an ESL learner, whereas authentic materials provide exposure to real language use. However, authentic materials can demotivate learners if the materials are not





appropriately graded or applicable to their interests. It is an important consideration to choose material, which is not too difficult or easy, and which relates culturally, so

adaptation is an important consideration for teachers. Equally important are effectively staging a reading or listening lesson to maximize output.

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