



Teaching Reading Strategies

Extensive research into reading habits of native speakers has identified a myriad of reading strategies that they use to help with comprehension of reading material. ESL approaches to reading have looked at ways that learners can approximate the practice of these native-speaker skills with reading texts. Generally, the ESL strategies break down into three categories determined by when they are typically applied, before reading, during reading and after reading.

The problem with teaching reading strategies (and most other aspects of language) in the classroom is that the classroom is an artificial environment and what students are asked to do in the classroom is usually not practiced outside, either because it is not appropriate or possible to practice or, because the student has not been able to transfer or translate the classroom skill to one that can be applied to real-world reading. For example, in the classroom pairs or groups of students are frequently asked to discuss the topic of the text they are about to read in order to activate what they already know about the topic. This pre-reading task is rarely done in the outside world. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers make students aware of the skill that they are practicing and, taking it one step further, the teacher either explains to students how they can transfer or translate the skill to the real world, or, as in the case with many of the activities in this collection, the students are guided through the process of taking a skill and making it independent of the classroom setting.

Before Reading

Pre-reading strategies are of three types, those that draw attention to linguistic features of the text, those that prepare students for conceptual or cultural aspects of the text and those that get students to activate knowledge or opinions they may have about what will be presented in the text. For each task, decide which category it belongs in (it can be more than one).

	Pre-Reading Tasks	Linguistic Features	Conceptual Cultural	Activate Schemata
1	Predicting content of text based on titles and visuals			
2	Predicting content based on knowledge of topic			
3	Predicting content based on knowledge of genre			
4	Reading or listening to background information			
5	Brainstorming vocab that might appear			
6	Discussing ideas that appear in the text			
7	Learning the meaning and use of discourse markers			
8	Pre-teaching vocab in text			
9	Skimming the text for gist comprehension			
10	Scanning the text for specific information			
11	Reading comprehension questions to answer			



While Reading

These strategies, as the name suggests, are employed as the reader is actually reading through the text. They are a bit more problematic to implement with students as it is hard to monitor what a learner is actually doing while reading (note that reading out loud is not considered valid reading practice) and there is sometimes a danger that the use of a strategy will interrupt or hinder the relatively natural flow of reading that is often so hard for learners to achieve. For example, studies have shown that the most effective readers are those who learn to gloss over words whose meaning they're not sure of and continue on reading through the text. Learners often fall into the trap of "tunneling" where they get overly concerned about the meaning of one word and in trying to decipher it lose some comprehension of what they have already read. So, the trick to implementing these strategies is to try not to hinder optimum reading speed and also not to take the learner's focus off comprehension of the text as a whole. What has been shown through studies is that strategies that get the students to interact with the text greatly improve comprehension. For example, texts with questions to the reader, even if rhetorical, seem to be understood by readers more than texts without them. What do you think?

Because of the danger of hindering the flow of reading some of the tasks below are best done after the initial reading as the aim is not so much that the students use the strategy to process the particular text that they are working with but that they practice the strategy with that text for use while reading other texts in the future. Indentify which "while-reading" strategies would be best practiced right after the initial reading.

	While Reading Tasks	While	After
1	Taking brief notes		
2	Underlining/highlighting important information or key words and phrases		
3	Ignoring unknown words		
4	Determining meaning of unknown words from context		
5	Making predictions while reading		
6	Paying attention to grammatical function of words		
7	Recognizing function of connectors (but, or, etc.) and referencers (it, this, etc.)		
8	Re-reading to repair comprehension		
9	Identifying topic sentences that contain main ideas		
10	Recognizing key words		
11	Making conclusions and inferences		
12	Paraphrasing while reading		
13	Distinguishing between fact and opinion		
14	Identifying writer's opinion or attitude		
15	Timed reading		
16	Scanning or skimming sections of text		
17	Recognizing function of discourse markers (for example, in conclusion, etc.)		
18	Composing comprehension questions		

18. Composing Comprehension Questions (sample activity from the handout)

Comprehension questions are designed primarily to promote understanding of essential content. These questions are **main point** questions and should dominate the list of comprehension questions. However, other questions to get students to notice specific information in the text should also be used. These are, of course, **detail** questions. In addition, and particularly at higher levels, one or two questions designed to get students to make inferences based on information in the text are used as we are often required in real life to **read between the lines**. Normally a student text will have between 5 and 8 comprehension questions and a mix of at least main point and detail, if not all three. The questions should be in the same order as the answers appear in the text with the possible exception of the inference questions. To really function as comprehension questions, they should be impossible to answer using general knowledge. You should always make students aware of the type of comprehension questions they are answering (even though many coursebooks don't) as it's important that they understand what skill they are practicing. If your students are quite familiar with the three main types of questions, you can have them write the questions themselves. This requires the use of two different sets of texts and students work in pairs or small groups to compose the questions for the other group to answer with the text that they will also give them. Writing comprehension questions is actually a great way to promote comprehension of the text.

The following activity was one of the ones demonstrated in the workshop and it illustrates how a process can be used to adapt a classroom-based skill that is not applicable to the real world (e.g., answering comprehension questions) to one that can easily be implemented in the real world.

Getting students to write their own comprehension questions is a great way to get them to focus on the most important points in a text and it improves comprehension because as they read, they will be constantly evaluating what they read in terms of its overall importance. As writing comprehension questions is an artificial task which native speakers do not do when reading, try using this sort of procedure over time to convert this "classroom" skill to a real-world one.

- Train students to write their own comprehension questions by giving each member of a pair one of two different texts and each student reads their text and writes questions to hand to the other student along with the text.
- Once students have had enough practice in writing comprehension questions, have them do the same procedure with their text but this time have them take brief notes on the main points. They keep the notes but hand their texts to another student and after the other student reads the text, they use their notes to compose oral questions to their partner about the main points. Alternatively, especially for lower level learners, give each student two copies of their text and they underline or highlight the most important information. They can then give one copy of their text to the other student to read and then they compose the oral comprehension questions by referring to the highlighted parts of the text they kept.
- The next stage would also involve pairs of students working with different texts. They read their text and compose comprehension questions in their head on the main points. Then they give their text to their partner and after the partner reads their text, they ask the questions to their partner.
- The final stage has all students working with the same text. Students read the text and compose comprehension questions in their heads as they read. They then alternate asking comprehension questions to a partner. You should have now trained students to focus on and remember the most important points when they read!



Post-Reading

These strategies are not really drawn directly from strategies used by native-speaker readers but were created as a means of enhancing a learner's involvement with the text, recognizing the experience a learner has with a text is not exactly the same as a native-speaker's. However, since studies of effective native-speaker readers demonstrated that involvement with the text led to increased comprehension, these post-reading tasks are meant to simulate the questioning and other means of working with ideas or content that would take place in the mind of a native-speaker reader *while* reading the text. Because it's often too much to expect that a learner trying for comprehension might be effectively able to work with the text while reading, placing these tasks after the text was seen as the next best thing – although in many cases native speaker do not use any post-reading strategies.

These activities are not meant to be confused with while-reading tasks that are delayed to after the initial reading (see previous section above) but are tasks that have been added on to increase student interaction with the text. The most common form of post-reading tasks - and those that dominate coursebooks – are those that involve answering questions about the text that were assigned prior to reading.

	Post-reading Tasks
1	Answering comprehension questions about content
2	Students give and discuss opinions about text
3	Locating lexical and grammatical items in the text
4	Locating and categorizing cohesive devices (connectors, referencers and discourse markers
5	Summarizing the text in writing or speaking
6	Paraphrasing the text or sections of the text in writing or speaking
7	Identifying features of genre