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Teaching Reading at the Advanced Level

Many different opinions on the place of reading among the remaining fundamental language skills, that is listening, speaking and writing, are represented by foreign language teachers. Although never does it happen that the reading skill is completely neglected in the entire methodological approach, its treatment may vary from regarding it as "a by-product of the process of learning the spoken language"¹⁾ to advocating "early use of reading and writing as well as speaking and listening."²⁾ For some teachers reading is the most valuable skill.³⁾

A careful consideration of the problem allows us to find a number of arguments in favour of evaluating reading better. First of all, listening and reading are much easier to master as compared with speaking and writing which require a lot of activity on the part of the learner and special teacher's guidance for a long period of time. What is more, reading seems to be easier than listening as, owing to the fact that the written language is permanent, the learner is able to work at his own pace and according to his abilities, although he should be progressively instructed on how to read efficiently. Of extreme importance is also the possibility of maintaining the reading skill after formal training is finished because of good access to written materials (books, periodicals, newspapers read for information or for pleasure). Of course to be able to read freely any original texts the learner must pass several stages of learning reading.⁴⁾ The ones which immediately precede independent reading belong to the advanced level of foreign language teaching, the matter of discussion of the present article.

Reading at the advanced level should be entirely based on original texts, although the most difficult ones may be excluded.⁵⁾ It is desirable to choose contemporary material. *Wings Rivers*, who discusses this problem in greater detail, suggests essays of general interest (scientific, sociological, political or artistic) or some items from literature, as short stories, novels or plays.⁶⁾

Reading based on the original material in the foreign language brings about some problems resulting from the fact of the use of the written language e.g. difficult vocabulary, structure of complex sentences or the style of a given author. But these difficulties may be surmounted (and this should be the main objective of the reading class) by the application of appropriate techniques improving the skills necessary for efficient reading (which differ considerably from the skills already acquired in oral/aural training).

In her article Virginia French Allen discusses contemporary trends in the teaching of reading⁷⁾, all of which must be taken into account at the advanced level as well. The two main trends are expectancy and redundancy, strictly connected with the two natural properties of language: the existence of linguistic clues and many redundant elements. Increasing emphasis is laid on connected discourse (large units - paragraphs and whole essays) and the role of sequence signals. Interrelationship between training reading and writing is also stressed: writing is advocated as a good means to achieve reading improvement. And the last one to be touched upon here is the postulate of recognizing the complexity of languages and its structures and avoiding simplifications in speech but especially in the written language. This seems to be a very important point when the teaching of reading at the advanced level is being considered.

As has already been mentioned above the English language learners will surely find themselves in such situations in which they will be bound to read for information, and they may be satisfied only if they do it efficiently, rapidly and with full understanding. Efficiency, rapidity and full understanding are regarded by William Norris the three main goals in teaching advanced reading.⁸⁾ Moreover, it is quite obvious that only the ability of facile and efficient reading can make people read

willingly for their pleasure.

According to William Norris, reading at the advanced level requires improvement in five areas of skills:

- 1) speed of recognition and comprehension
- 2) vocabulary recognition and comprehension
- 3) sentence structure and sentence comprehension
- 4) paragraph structure and paragraph comprehension
- 5) comprehension of the complete selection.⁹⁾

The speed of reading and comprehension are often joined together as some methodologists are of the opinion that only quick reading may give full comprehension. One of the ways to teach learners to read faster is the use of timed reading and exercises which may give good practice in quicker recognizing and understanding words and sentences e.g.: word matching, word pairs, one-word definitions, synonyms and opposites, and reading by structures.¹⁰⁾

Vocabulary seems to bring about much more trouble at the advanced level than it does at lower levels. Too much dependence on a dictionary slows the speed of reading to an unacceptable degree and, in addition to that, not every shade of meaning of a given word can be simply checked in a dictionary. Of great help here may be the knowledge of the processes of word formation (affixes and derived words, word compounds) which prevents us from overusing a dictionary. Context clues when understood properly may help a lot to determine the lexical range of a word in a particular context (it is often necessary to go beyond the literal meaning of a word).

Many difficulties in teaching reading at the advanced level are connected with some grammatical constructions typical only of written English and hence completely unknown from the purely aural/oral stages of language learning. So good reading requires the study of certain more complicated grammatical forms, e.g. complex NP's and VP's, adverbial clauses and prepositional phrases in initial position, inversions or other word order modifications, or such a problem as the extensive use of passive constructions in some types of written English. William Norris suggests here a number of various types of drills on grammatical details and complex sentence structure.¹¹⁾

Full comprehension is another extremely important factor

which is indispensable for efficient reading. Comprehension cannot be limited to understanding separate sentences; from this the understanding of paragraph structures should always follow. For training in larger units, the logical relationships in them and among them the following techniques are usually recommended: reading for the central idea, discussing paragraph development, scanning for specific information, paraphrasing or analyzing particular paragraphs and asking comprehension questions. Similar techniques may be used to practice comprehension of a complete selection e.g. surveying for main ideas and organizational pattern (outlining, paraphrasing and summarizing).¹²⁾

In recent writings there has been emphasis laid on joining reading with training in other language skills. To Julia Johnson¹³⁾ five activities may be of use here: pronunciation, conversation, writing, cultural understanding and art.

Reading aloud may give a good opportunity to train foreign language pronunciation (stress, intonation and juncture). Although there are methodologists who advise reading aloud at all the levels of teaching reading¹⁴⁾, especially while reading plays or dialogues, some controversial voices of experienced teachers may be heard.¹⁵⁾ It has been noticed that reading aloud may be more harmful than helpful to many learners who are unable to concentrate on pronunciation and comprehension at the same time and they do not understand what they are reading about even if their pronunciation mistakes are few. Hence a clear remark should be made here: whether the teacher decides to introduce reading aloud in the classroom or not he should remember that silent reading is the type of reading which is essential in extensive reading and that the long-range aim is to arouse such motivation in the learner which would encourage him to wider reading of his own choice.

A reading passage may serve as a good starting point for a discussion based on a given selection, especially when it is of interest for the learners. Students may be asked not only to answer comprehension questions (at the advanced level they should be connected with some judgment or reference to students' experience) but they should also be able to talk fluently about the main ideas presented in the selection, make a summary in their own words or be able to deliver arguments and counterarguments

if any controversial problems arise.¹⁶⁾ To confirm the total comprehension of their reading selection students may be asked to write a passage (giving a short summary or presenting their own judgments) after having discussed the topic orally in the classroom or quite independently from the things done with the teacher.

As all the most important problems of reading at the advanced level have already been touched upon in the present paper, to conclude the discussion the term "creative reading" will be mentioned. This term is often associated with the later stages of reading procedures. According to John Morris¹⁷⁾ "creative reading" (sometimes also called "critical reading") comprises three elements: literal comprehension, critical insight and emotional involvement. Limitation to literal comprehension, in other words, decoding only the print itself impoverishes very much the interpretation of a text, especially the reading of prose fiction, which surely will find its place among other readings at the advanced level. So only "creative reading", which is surely the one which fulfils the conditions of efficient, rapid reading with full understanding will make the learner feel independent to such an extent that he will be courageous enough to begin reading for relaxation with no further need of the teacher.

Notes

- 1) Norris, William B., Advanced Reading, Goals, Techniques, Procedures (in) Croft, K. (ed.) Readings on English as a Second Language, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1972; quotation from Comodius's book Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language (1953)
- 2) Haynes, Charles S., The Language-Lab "Love Story", ETJ, vol. XI, No 4, quoting the pedagogical implications of Chomsky's theories as summarized by Susumu Kuno, p.17
- 3) Stevenson, Robert M., Using Slides to Improve Reading Comprehension, ETJ, vol. XI, No 2, p.10
- 4) Rivers, Olga, Teaching Foreign-Language Skills, Chicago and London, 1968, pp.213-239
- 5) There are many different views upon the problem of using simplified texts for teaching reading but avoiding them at the advanced level is out of question. In conformity with contem-

porary tendencies many teachers recommend eliminating them

quite early in the process of teaching reading.

- 6) Rivers, Wilga, op.cit., p.235
- 7) Allen, Virginia Trench, Trends in the Teaching of Reading, ETF, vol.XI, No 3, pp.8-12
- 8) Norris, William E., op.cit., p.191
- 9) Ibid., p.191
- 10) Ibid., pp.194-200
- 11) Ibid., p.197
- 12) Ibid., p.198
- 13) Dobson, Julia, Making the Most of Reading, ETF, vol.XI, No 2, pp.7-9
- 14) Finocchiaro, Mary, English as a Second Language: From Theory to Practice, PWN, Warszawa 1967, p.71
- 15) Seliger, H. W., Improving Reading Speed and Comprehension in English as a Second Language, ETF, vol.AVII, No 1, p.48;
Jędrzejowski, Stanisław, Problem czytania głośnego w nauczaniu języka obcego, "Języki Obce w Szkole", Nr 4, 1975, pp.221-223
- 16) Dobson, Julia, op.cit., p.9
- 17) Morris, John, Creative Reading, ETF, vol.XXVI, No 3, pp.257-261

LUBELSKIE MATERIAŁY NEOFILOLOGICZNE—1975

James Cornick

Question and answer programs

The question (Q) and answer (A) procedure which usually follows the reading of a typical "comprehension text" in an EFL class is designed to test the students' comprehension of the text. It is, therefore, usually dominated by the teacher. He chooses the Qs he feels the students ought to be able to answer; he chooses the Qs he chooses the Qs, the students' comprehension will not be adequately tested (if the students choose their own Qs, they will, naturally, choose only the easy ones). The students are, consequently, expected to do little more than sit and wait for their turns to be examined.

I do not agree with this attitude. I do not think the students will necessarily choose the easy Qs if they are allowed to choose for themselves; but even if they do choose slightly easier Qs than the teacher would have chosen, I do not think this is such a bad thing. The problem in most EFL classes is not that the students' comprehension is inadequately tested, but that too much time is occupied by the teacher talking and too little by the students. I am not, of course, suggesting that comprehension tests be abandoned and conversation classes put in their place; but I am suggesting that comprehension tests, or classes, would benefit the students more if the testing (Q and A) procedure became more student-dominated and less teacher-dominated, more like a conversation about the text and less like an examination on the text.

This paper is an outline of one method of implementing this suggestion. It is obviously not the only method; but it is a method I have used successfully over the last two and a half years in Poland with adult students at the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels¹.

The basic idea is that the teacher, instead of being one of the participants (usually the questioner) in the Q and A procedure, should be the programmer. He should devise programs of Qs and As