

Reading for specific information requires global reading skills, but the scope of such tasks is rather narrow : they merely target *location* of information, not comprehension of the message. The basic data and the specific information give readers some clues concerning the message of the text, but many (linguistic or informational) problems are ignored or dealt with only superficially. That is why, such tasks must be followed by other kinds of exercises.

### b) Reading for the main idea

When the teacher's aim is to focus on *comprehension* of the message and develop global reading skills, he may ask the students to skim the text and write down, in one sentence, what it is about. For example, the students are told to read a story silently and fast (they are given a time limit), then they are asked to summarize it in no more than 20 words. If the text is long, they may be asked to read and summarize each paragraph separately, to make an outline for the text. Or, they may be asked to differentiate between the main idea and the elements that illustrate and support it. The task targets not only the students' ability to decode the text, but also their skill to systematize and summarize the information.

Obviously, scanning must be followed by sentence-level reading, whereby the students process and analyze the text at deeper levels. The advantage of the approach consists in the fact that the students are taught to focus on textual meaning rather than on that of the individual words. This way, they get to understand the message of the text fast and easily, without stumbling over its difficulties (for example, too many unknown words), and the story unfolds smoothly. The procedure also trains the students in taking notes and outlining.

Reading in this way, the students get encouraged to deal with texts on their own and learn to use their reading skills outside the classroom, too.

### c) Reading for inferences

Some texts, especially literary ones, require a further step : the reader must *make inferences* concerning the actual meaning of a text, or the author's intent. For example, interpreting a poem may be quite hard – the reader must make efforts to understand *what* the writer *actually* wanted to say. With other types of texts, the students may need to identify the author's intent, i.e. *why* the writer is telling the story and what he really means. To make the proper inferences, the students may need some help from the teacher and discussions in which they should be allowed to express their diverging opinions.

Take, for instance, James Thurber's famous *The Unicorn in the Garden* :

#### **The Unicorn in the Garden**

By James Thurber

(summary)

One beautiful summer morning, a husband sees in his garden a unicorn grazing quietly his wife's roses. Puzzled, he goes in to tell his wife the wonderful news, but the latter, who does not like her husband's nonsense, calls him "a booby" and sends for the police and for a psychiatrist.

When the policeman and the doctor arrive, the wife tells them that her husband has seen a unicorn in the garden. The two men look at each other meaningfully. When

they ask the husband if he has seen a unicorn in the garden, the latter rejects the idea indignantly, saying that the unicorn is a mythical beast. On hearing his reply, the men catch the wife and put her in a straightjacket.

The story ends with a **MORAL** :

*Don't count your boobies until they are hatched.*

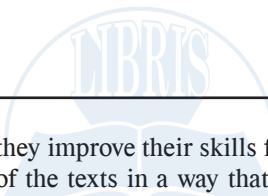
With such a text, reading must obviously go further than mere understanding of its linguistic content : it is so ambiguous that it puzzles, rather than informs, the reader, and it can be read and interpreted in many different ways. That is why, the students will feel the need to read the text again, discuss it with their classmates, express their opinions and feelings. And interesting texts urge teacher and students alike to set up imaginative communicative activities (e.g. a husband-wife-neighbour situation, in which the cheater gets the final punishment).

### 5.3. Practical recommendations

With traditional textbooks, the texts were written specifically to build the learners' knowledge of the language : they aimed to introduce certain vocabulary or to illustrate a certain problem of grammar (e.g. the comparative of adjectives). Communicative teaching insists on using *authentic texts* for teaching foreign languages – and authentic texts can hardly be controlled in terms of difficulty or directed towards a certain linguistic field. Nevertheless, the texts used in the classroom must help the students to gradually build up their language skills, therefore they must illustrate “essential English,” i.e. basic vocabulary and grammar structures, as well as typical conversational patterns. Foreign language learners must also be trained to perceive the difference between their own culture and that of the language they aim to master. That is why many modern foreign language textbooks – especially those for beginners – are written by native speakers of the language in cooperation with or supervised and adapted by trained representatives of the country where the textbook will be used.

Traditional textbooks were structured in lessons, with each lesson centered round a text to be read, analyzed, learned and expanded through oral and written exercises. Modern textbooks are generally organized into units, each unit into several lessons, each lesson with its own texts and range of activities ; moreover, today's lessons no longer contain one long text, but several shorter ones. Consequently, instead of focusing on one text and learning it, now the students have to divide their attention among several ; instead of *learning* texts, now they must learn to *use* them properly, to analyze them and process their information. This way, the students achieve at least three things simultaneously :

1. they build their language skills by enriching their vocabulary and improving their grammar ;
2. they acquire information from the texts, e.g. elements pertaining to the culture of the target language (customs, history, literature, etc.) ;



3. they improve their skills for intellectual work, i.e. they learn to process the information of the texts in a way that is similar to real world reading : in the real world we come across texts of different kinds, from various sources.

Even though modern lessons seem to have no “main” text, the teacher usually organizes his lesson around one text/group of texts (e.g. the four short texts united under the title *America Through the Looking Glass*, Fig.4). In relation to the main reading material, and according to the specific teaching aim for the particular moment in the lesson, the teacher sets up text-related tasks. All tasks need to be motivated by the context and purpose of learning.

According to the specific moment in the lesson, there are three main types of activities :

- pre-listening/reading activities (the warm-up), i.e. those activities which precede the reading of the text ;
- while-listening/reading activities, i.e. those activities which accompany it ; and
- post-listening/reading activities, i.e. the “after-reading” activities.

Post-reading/listening activities are generally succeeded by the follow-up – a stage in which the students expand the text on their own, usually as homework assignment. Although pre- and post-listening/reading activities rely more on speaking or writing than on reading, many pre- and post-listening/reading tasks involve short texts to be read or listened to, therefore they will be dealt with in this chapter.

### a) The warm-up : pre-listening/reading tasks

In traditional grammar-translation textbooks, each new lesson begins with a new text and the learner must approach the text directly, without any preparation. However, this kind of approach may be difficult for most students. That is why audio-lingual textbooks introduced, before the main text, one (or several) page(s) of exercises of the objective type (e.g. the exercise in Fig. 5, used to precede a text about professions). Their aim was to facilitate the introduction of the new vocabulary and thus to help the students to access the informational content of the text more easily. Modern communicative textbooks also provide a richly illustrated introductory section, with short label-like texts, exercises and tasks to be carried out by the students (e.g. Fig. 6 – from *English G 2000*, 1999 : 79). Their function is to introduce the new topic, vocabulary or grammar rather than to provide information.

The introductory section functions as a warm-up and targets several aims :

- to help the students activate their prior knowledge of the world and of society in matters related to the subject of the text ;
- to introduce the new topic and provide reasons for reading ; to get the students interested in the text and eager to participate in the activities ;

LESSON 4

AMERICA THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

I. Work in four groups. Read the following magazine cuttings. Every group reads an article, discusses its main points with the members of the group and then, somebody in the group tells the other groups about the information in the article. Take notes.

A. The eye stories of the Bible and its striking images were extremely attractive to the Black people. Ironically enough, Christian religion was attributed to them by the white people who at the same time brought and sold them and kept them as slaves ever intended to make their world. The Bible became an important part of their life. To the Christian religion Black people added their own uniquely and formidable sense of life. The result was a more nuanced and more meaningful religion with its forms and practices well suited to minister with a strong rhythm in their voices. They added our own life and the congregations responded in a unique. Out of these simple services came the one called "spirit music" which still exists today.

B. Spirituals take their origin neither from the Bible nor in about material music such as the Lord Delivering David from the lion's den or David delivering Goliath. Some songs are about love and salvation. One person will sing the most important lines while the others will answer with a short chorus. The group to sing the chorus (to answer) on the judgement do they ever end my brother?"

C. "The blues", this singular style of music is considered a creation of the Blacks. To be the means to be sad and the blues music, accompanied by a guitar or occasional piano chord is harmonious and solo, using about some thirty notes which had happened to him. His melodies were simple, casual or whimsical. This was a true style of singing and he introduced it in every aspect of his life. He also took every "road" word, then something by listening, in order to get the meaning across. This country was finally consisting of their words and had a great influence on jazz and on contemporary pop music.

D. The blues are all around. Today the blues man sings about love, the police and the plans still using the important notes of expression which is the blues.

Christian (evangelist) - creation gospel - Chad Spell - 1. evangelist 2. testimony, proselytization, whistling - B. L. Whiskey - film - "Blues" - Collins (guitar) / New Orleans high school - Mardi Gras / mardi gras.

Fig. 4. Under the Looking Glass (from Bălan et al., 1996 : 86)

- to introduce the new *vocabulary* and prepare the students for the linguistic difficulties of the new text ; etc.

It is important that the learners should approach the new text confidently, so that it is helpful if they know the key words in advance : a beginner who is asked to read a text about professions understands the text better if he already knows the names of some professions. The introductory section illustrates the new vocabulary both linguistically and visually. For example, the matching exercise in Fig. 6 aims to introduce and drill a number of *verbs* (*to get up, to make, to play, etc.* – written in the box, top right) and *adverbs* (*always, never, often, etc.* – the words are written on the arrows). The new words are then drilled with the help of other exercises, objective as well as communicative ones. Grammar structures are also dealt with, in similar ways. Once they know the key words and structures, the students will have less difficulty in coping with the text itself.

Matching elements	
(a)	(b)
a pilot	takes care of books
a nurse	designs machines
an engineer	teaches students
a farmer	looks after sick people
a librarian	flies aeroplanes
a teacher	grows crops
etc.	

Fig. 5. Words and definitions

11 ▶ Trundle often rides a bike

Write six sentences with *always, never, often, sometimes and usually*. (Of course you can write funny sentences, too!) These words can help you:

get up at • make • play  
read • ride • sleep in a  
watch • wear

*Trundle often rides a bike.  
Cici always...*

Fig. 6. Words and pictures  
(English G. 1999 : 79)

But introduction of the new words and structures is only one function of the warm-up. Classroom activities become efficient only if the students are involved – both intellectually and emotionally – in the interaction and participate actively. Therefore, the teacher must find ways to stir the students’ imagination and make them eager to express opinions and discover hidden meanings. An excited tone of voice and a friendly smile can do wonders in securing the students’ good will. Yet, without interesting learning material and dynamic classroom activities the enthusiasm will be short lived. That is why, the teacher needs to enrich the lesson with whatever visual or auditory material he can lay hands on, and devise activities that should make the students curious to find out more by reading the text.

One of the most important aims of the pre-reading activities is to help the students *internalize* the new topic (to come to “see and feel” it, to view it as part of their own experience) by *activating* their prior knowledge of the world and of society. The teacher must be aware that the learner who reads a new text is an individual endowed with a personal life experience and knowledge of the world. This knowledge not only helps him to decode and interpret the new material more easily, but also has a great bearing on the way he perceives the new text : the reader *contributes meaning* to the text according to his personality and world experience. The teacher must help the students activate their subject-related knowledge, so that they can make correct predictions concerning the message and significance of the new text. Association with similar events/writings can be of

great help. For example, before having the students read excerpts from *Huckleberry Finn*, the teacher can mention Creangă's *Memories of My Boyhood*; this prepares them to foresee funny incidents and youthful pranks for the new text. If the students are well prepared for the reading material and their knowledge of the world is properly activated, they will be less dependent on the individual words of the text.

Obviously, pre-reading activities must integrate reading with speaking and/or writing: while focusing on the information provided by the new text, the students must also express opinions (orally or in writing), participate in group discussions, expand the text, or sustain it with arguments.

Pre-reading activities can be extremely varied, depending on the richness of the text-book (sometimes there is also a students' book), the teacher's inventiveness, the students' eagerness to express and share opinions, and on a multitude of other factors. Pre-reading tasks range from simple, discrete point items, to complex communicative ones in which the students interact, negotiate meaning, express opinions and share information. Such tasks must be similar to real life exchanges and easy to personalize: the students should be able to identify with the roles assigned to them in the activity and perceive the interaction as plausible.

Among the numerous warm-up techniques currently used by teachers, the most widely used are:

- *objective tasks*, used to introduce the new vocabulary:
  - matching words with their definitions, matching pictures with short texts, filling in blanks, continuing sentences, correcting mistakes, etc.;
  - sentence builders, i.e. key words to be used in the new story; word associations;
  - slash sentences/paragraphs, i.e. re-arranging sentences/ paragraphs to make up a story;
  - personalized completion; personalized true/false;
  - create a story with visuals; describing objects/processes; guided description/narration; etc.;
- *prediction*: the students are asked to make guesses/predictions concerning the text to come, the vocabulary to be used:
  - e.g. the teacher gives the students the title of the text/unit and asks them to make a list of the elements they expect to find in it: subject, characters, the plot of the text, etc., as in the example below:

**Title:** *Not all that glitters is gold*

**Predictions** (possible variant): a man; was greedy; wanted a lot of money; was granted his wish; was not happy; etc.

- the cloze procedure can be used to get the students to predict parts of the information they are going to encounter in the text – e.g. information regarding the life of a famous personality (see the gapped text on the life of Abraham Lincoln quoted before); after the task, the students are invited to scan the text and see if they had made the right predictions or not.
- *discussions*, aiming to activate the learners' previous knowledge and prepare the students for the text; to introduce the new topic and get them interested in the new text; to guide their observations while reading;

- comprehension questions ; problem questions ;
- personalized questions ; related questions ;
- conversation cards ; directed dialogue ;
- paired interviews ; surveys and polls ;
- social interaction activities ; etc.
- *brainstorming* : the procedure also relies on the learners' predictive capacity, but it has a wider scope : the students are invited to make any contribution they deem appropriate ;
  - e.g. the teacher offers a key word, a problem question, a title, a proverb, or a picture, and asks the students to call out or write down fast as many words/ideas that come to their minds by *free association* ;
  - the students write down random lists of words and ideas that they consider to be related to the notion ; they must activate their knowledge of the world to make their contributions, and thus they get prepared for the new lesson, as in the example :

**Title :** *Advertising*

**Instruction :** Write down words and ideas that the title brings to your mind.

**Student's list** (possible variant): *posters, TV commercials, interrupt TV programs, provide information, the perfume on reading the ad, etc. ;*

- the teacher then helps them to organize their random items, so as to fit in with the new reading material, and together they develop a coherent plan for an essay or a debate : definition, types, advantages, disadvantages, etc.

Brainstorming is a highly popular technique : it is easy to set (very little preparation is required), yet it prepares the students efficiently for the text (it involves the entire class in the activity). In addition, it allows the students considerable freedom of imagination, the possibility to activate their prior knowledge, and to express opinions and thoughts.

## b) While-listening/reading tasks

Most exercise types suggested as pre-reading tasks can be used as while-reading activities, too, but their use will differ both in scope and aim. The textbook and the students' notebooks generally provide a wide variety of *objective tasks* (grids, gapped texts, matching elements, sentences to be continued, questions to be answered according to the information in the text, etc.) to be used as while- or after-reading activities. To find the correct answers, the students must skim or scan the text, or read it out in full. Such exercises are motivating and ensure active reading. However, unless the textbooks/students' books are well provided with such tasks, they require a lot of preparation by the teacher.

Furthermore, different texts require different types of reading, so that the teacher can deal with the new text in many different ways.

If the new text is reasonably short, it is generally introduced with the help of a listening activity : if the teacher has the new text on tape, the students can listen to a native speaker giving the model reading. If not, it is either the teacher or one of the students who gives the model reading. While listening to the text, the students may have various tasks to complete, so as to make their participation active.