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TEACHING READING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: SENTENCE METHOD OR ECLECTIC
METHOD?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines different methods of teaching reading in a foreign language with specific reference to their merits and demerits in terms of application in an EFL/ESL classroom context. The article, first, describes different methods of teaching reading to beginners with examples drawn from real-world situations and then it looks at some of the strategies of reading which intermediate learners may require to master so that they can become proficient readers in a given community. Finally, it emphasizes why readers need to be comprehensive and critical in their readings given the fact that they are called upon to make decision on a wide range of important local, national and international issues.

Key words: Reading strategies, symbols, encoding, decoding and phonological features.

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INTRODUCTION

Stressing the importance of teaching reading to children, in a module entitled Teaching Reading in Primary Schools, Carter (2000, p. 3) writes that "since reading forms the basis for all other areas of learning, it is necessary to ensure that children of the primary grades attain proficiency in reading" (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001351/135162eo.pdf>). This implies that reading is one of the major language skills which is expected to be mastered by learners in most EFL programs. Therefore, it has become one of the responsibilities of an EFL/ESL teacher to help learners develop their reading skills at the initial stage of learning a foreign language so that learners are more likely to become proficient readers in the target language at a later stage. At the outset, it seems imperative for an ESL/EFL teacher to understand what reading means and what goes on while someone is reading. Reading is a complex process which cannot be easily

described without having an awareness of the basic factors involved in the process. Therefore, let us try to understand the basic factors inherent in reading process by referring to a simple example illustrated using some symbols as in figure 1 below. What is mentioned in the figure 1 are some symbols and our next question is to see what those symbols mean to us. Even though we are aware of what these symbols (+, -, x and ÷) are, their meanings cannot be established unless they are arranged in an order as shown in figure 2.

Figure 1. Some symbols

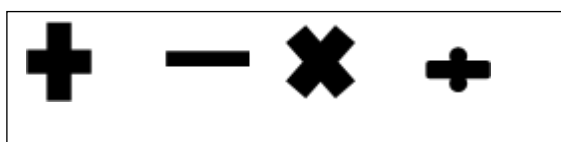
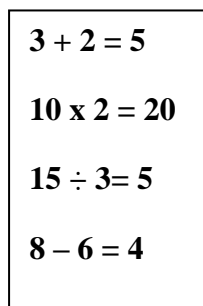


Figure 2. Symbols are arranged in order

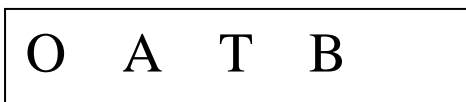


In our everyday life, we tend to come across symbols and signs in almost every place we visit whether it is railway station, library or a shopping mall.

Figure 3. Road signs



When we see road signs as shown in figure 3 above, we know what they mean to us because they represent ideas or concepts and if we happen to see the following, what would you think of them?



They are also symbols with different shapes and they also represent ideas but one may need to arrange them in order to form meaning. A few arrangements are possible with the symbols included in the box above. For example,

- 1. BOAT 2. AT 3. OAT 4. BAT 5. TAB

Given what has been described above, it is now important for us to understand that symbols play a major part in reading because those symbols are units of sounds which go together to form meaning. In any language, one may find that symbols are representations of the sounds through the letters of alphabet. Furthermore, these letters together form words and then word expand to form units of meaning. Therefore, when one writes, one represents sounds of a language through symbols or in a code and this process (in writing) is referred to as encoding. In contrast, what one does in reading is to interpret these symbols into sound units once again and this process is referred to as decoding. These two terms are important when a teacher wants to teach reading and writing to his/her EFL/ESL students. Even though reading process is considered as a cognitive function of the brain (which involves interpreting of symbols into sound units), given the structural

and phonological features of English, there can be many different methods which an EFL/ESL teacher can exploit when teaching reading to students in the classroom.

As the EFL/ESL domain indicates, there are many different methods of teaching to read. There are methods which emphasize on the elements of words and their sounds and also there are other methods which deal with larger units of language and focus on meaning. For example, the alphabetic method begins with the letters in which students are first taught the shapes of letters and then names before teaching the words. However in the phonic method, sounds are taught first and then the vowels and consonants are emphasized. The next method is called syllabic method in which the sounds that commonly go together are taught first and then the students are asked to combine these sound units to form words. Another popular method, which is known as the phrase method, concerns the unit as a phrase instead of a sentence or word.

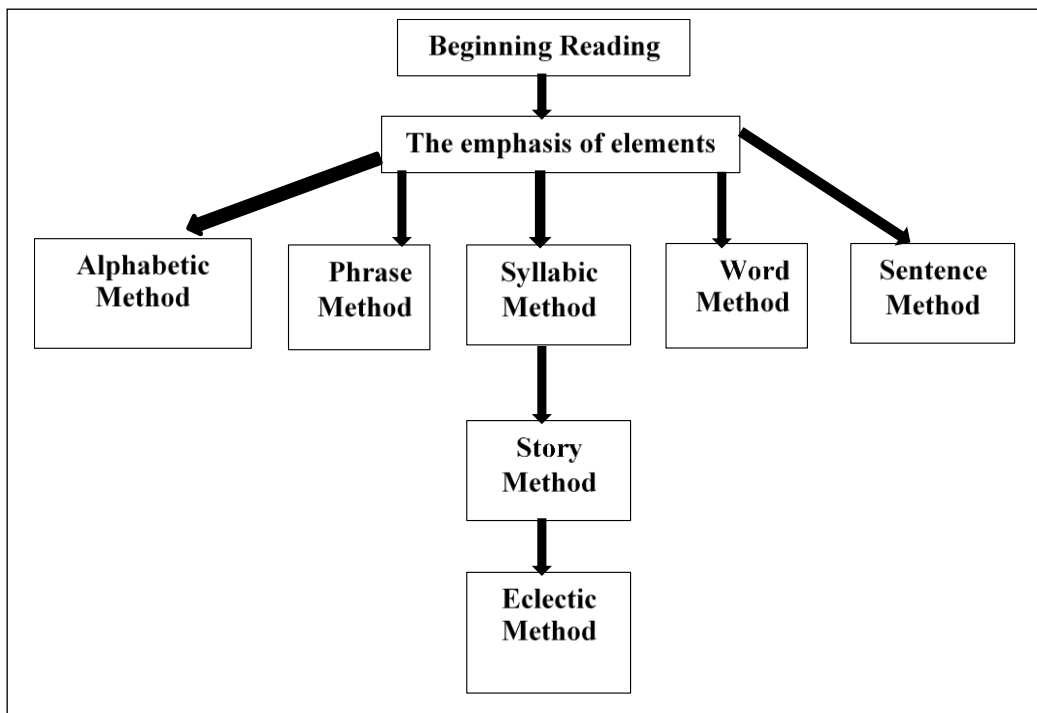
E.g. a tall building a kind woman

Students sometimes look at sentences and then break them down into words, syllables and phonemes and this method is referred to as the sentence method.

E.g. sit down stand up st_a_nd

The last method is the story method where the unit of reading is the story. Students read a story and later they are asked to break the story into smaller units of sentences, words, syllables and so on. We have so far described several methods of teaching to read. Each method has its own merits and demerits. Therefore, one may find that there is no single method which can be claimed as the best in teaching to read. An assumption is that there is no single best method in teaching to read lead us to figure out how well we, being EFL/ESL teachers, can combine many of the good points suggested in several methods cited above to help students improve their reading skills. When all good points from several methods are combined together, one can create a new method which is generally called eclectic method and eclectic method is highly encouraged in classroom teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Figure 4. The structure of an eclectic method looks like the figure below.



The main focus of all the methods described above is to expose the learner to the code of the language. As described above, the learner is taught how to put sounds into symbols which is called encoding. Furthermore, the learner is also taught how to interpret the symbols into sound. This process, as stated above, is decoding. Thus, the overall activity of reading and writing at the beginning stage can be said as ‘cracking the code’. Whatever method the teacher uses to teach reading to beginner level students, at the end of the first

year, each learner should know the symbols for sounds. This means that they should know both the sound and the name of the letter. Then, the learners should be aware as to how sounds combine to form syllables and words. This sort of awareness would help the beginner to start on his own. Later, the teacher should introduce the beginner level students to identify same sounds made by different combinations of letters as well as to identify different sounds made by the same letters.

E.g. teeth fet greet meet look book tea cream could should

E.g. put but cup

It should specifically be noted that an EFL teacher's understanding of how sounds are formed in English language will help the beginner to become a proficient reader as well as an effective learner in the class. As we described above, we now have some basic knowledge of how a beginner learners to read English. The most important aspects at this stage are recognizing symbols and making meaning out of them. Once learners learn to decode words, they should learn other skills of reading at the intermediate level.

The two very basic strategies a learner needs to get the meaning out of a reading passage are as follows: 1. The learner should be able to recognize symbols and the meaning they make. 2. The learner should make use of what he/she already knows to discover meaning of what he/she does not know. These two strategies must be taught to EFL/ESL learners at a very early stage. During the first two or three years of the foreign language learning, teachers must make their learners confident that they are able do a lot with what they already know and teach them to ignore what is difficult for them to achieve. Moreover, the learners of EFL/ESL should realize that reading is an individual responsibility. This means that one can read for himself but he cannot do it for another and the kind of meaning one gets out of a text will be his/her own. In the process of reading, the reader brings his own experience to the text he reads. In other words, reading is a receptive skill which involves responding to the text. A text is longer than a word or a sentence and it often contains a series of sentences which are connected to one another by grammar and vocabulary and/or knowledge of the world (Spratt, Pulverness & Williams, 2005). If you know a lot about the topic you read, you will understand the text better than someone who does not know anything about that topic.

Reading aloud

One should understand that reading and getting meaning out of a text does not mean that a learner has to read aloud. What we should understand in reading a text or any other message is that a learner is able to look at it silently and get the information he/she needs. However, there are occasions where people are called upon to read aloud in public. Imagine a news reader, announcer, and even a teacher, they have to read aloud in real-world situations. There are other reasons why reading aloud is considered not very useful as a reading activity. Some of them are given below for your information (Nation, 2009)

1. Reading is an activity of the eye and the brain but reading aloud is more concerned with ear and the brain.
2. Most EFL/ESL students cannot read aloud effectively and this may provide a poor model for the other students in the class.
3. Reading aloud sometimes helps in pronunciation. But there are other ways of teaching good pronunciation which could be done when the class time is allocated for oral skills.
4. The reading speed of an effective reader is much faster than his/her speaking.
5. Reading aloud focuses the reader to move only in one direction, whereas in real reading, we often look back and forth while we read.
6. Vital skills of reading such as selecting and interpreting meaning are ignored in loud reading.

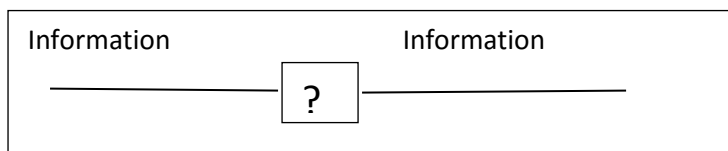
The reasons stated above indicate that teachers should not emphasize loud reading during reading lessons in the intermediate level. However, reading aloud is useful at the beginning level which we should not neglect when we teach reading to young learners. However, in practice, we can get one or two students to read out their answers in the class and sometimes the whole class to read out certain sentences depending on the nature of the reading activity. This does not mean that that class time should be spent on students reading one after the other as it was done a few decades ago. With this background knowledge of reading, let us move on

to the basic skills of reading (scanning, skimming, reading for comprehension, and reading for critical evaluation) which we will describe below.

As we discussed above, once a learner has mastered the basic mechanics of interpreting the symbols, he/she should learn different ways of reading because different text types such as letters, messages, instruction leaflets, and articles demand different ways of reading. We practically know that it is impossible for us to read a railway timetable in the same way as we read an email message from our friend. Therefore, it is necessary for a teacher to help learners develop different skills of reading at the intermediate level and above.

As the literature which deals with teaching to read suggests, there are four basic skills of reading such as scanning, skimming, reading for comprehension, and reading for critical evaluation. It should be noted that the selection of the skills will depend on the type of text and the purpose for which we read. Now we will explain one by one in detail. Imagine we plan to visit another country during our holidays and on the day of the travel we go to the airport. The first thing we do is to look at the departure time table displayed in the departure area of the airport. The time table has information of other flights departing the same airport but we are not concerned about such information as we only want to find out a very specific information relevant to our flight. In this process, our eyes quickly move up and down and stop where the information relevant to our flight is stated and we read only that leaving out most of what is there in the time table. This kind of quick movement of the eyes, looking for very specific information is what we call scanning. In other words, in scanning, we have a lot of required information with us but we are interested in only for a very specific bit of information to fill a gap as illustrated in the figure 5. It is also very quick way of finding information. With this background information, we now can move on to the next reading skill which is skimming.

Figure 5



Skimming

In scanning we look for a very specific bit of information we want to find out. However, if we need to know the general idea of what we read quickly, we generally look for the headings, sub topics or pictures which accompany the text. In addition, we let our eyes run on through the text to determine what the general idea the text gives out or the gist of it. This skill is termed as skimming. However, it is very difficult sometimes to determine which of the two skills stated above come first in reading or where one skill begins and the other ends. For that matter, the difference between the two, according to Nuttall (2005), the distinction between the two is not particularly important. In both, the reader is not reading in the normal sense of the word, but in forcing his eyes over the print at a rate which permits him to take in only, perhaps the beginnings and ends of paragraphs (where information is often summarized), chapter headings, and subtitles. According to Texas Educational Agency (2002), the purpose of reading should be comprehension in which readers get meaning out of what they read. Research has shown that students who develop the ability to comprehend what they read in a text has a profound effect on their entire lives. Therefore, given the positive benefits of reading comprehension, EFL/ESL teachers should know what comprehension entails and how they should teach the key comprehension strategies to learners to make them competent and enthusiastic readers. It is to this aspect we now turn.

Reading for comprehension

In the field of reading, a number of studies relating to cognitive sciences have investigated how readers construct meaning as they read. Specifically, those studies have mainly focused on the mental activities that good readers engage in order to achieve comprehension. From those studies a new concept with regards to reading has emerged. According to the new concept, reading is termed as a complex, active process of constructing meaning. The act of constructing meaning has three stages as follows:

1. Interactive: it involves not just the reader but also the text and the context in which reading takes place. 2. Strategic: readers have purposes for their reading and use a variety of strategies and skills as they construct meaning. 3. Adaptable: readers change the strategies they use as they read different kinds of text or as they read for different purposes (<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/what-research-tells-us-about-reading-comprehension>). In line with the meaning construction process, being readers, we decide whether a text is worth reading more intensively by skimming and scanning. If the text is worth reading more intensively, we read the text more carefully and understand the whole text. Reading a text carefully and attentively enables a reader to react to what has been written about and this kind of reading is known as reading for comprehension. Reading for comprehension demands more commitment and more difficult linguistic skills from the reader. Once the text has been thoroughly understood, most readers would like to express their opinions about it. They may agree with the point of view of the writer or they may disagree. This the next skill we are going to explore below.

Reading for critical evaluation

Stressing the importance of critical thinking, Halpern (2013) writes that it is imperative for all citizens of the 21st century to be able to think critically because for the first time in the history of the human race, we have the ability to destroy all life on earth. This view explicitly informs us that the decisions we make as individuals and as a society regarding economy, conservation of natural resources and the development of nuclear or biological weapons will affect future generations of all people around the world. As stated by Halpern (2013), it seems crucially important that we teach our students to evaluate ideas, opinions, claims, decisions and conclusions of others in a critical manner. Sometimes when we read some articles, we may have to agree or disagree with what the writers say. In order to evaluate a piece of writing, we have to read carefully and think about what the writer expresses before we come to a conclusion in that we have to examine critically what the writer says and pass a judgment. The reader may particularly like the style in which the text is written or there may be other factors that will arrest his/her attention. This sort of critical examination helps the reader to evaluate the text. However, this requires the reader to exhibit more developed linguistic skills and to react to language more seriously. It can be argued that the skills of reading have to be developed gradually and systematically in the readers of a foreign language over a period of time. A learner should engage in much hard work in the act of developing advanced skills of reading such as reading for comprehension and reading for critical evaluation.

Conclusion

In this article, we have described different methods involved in teaching reading in a foreign language and their advantages and disadvantages in terms of application in an EFL/ESL classroom context. Then, we have dealt with why an EFL/ESL teacher should choose to teach the main reading skills (scanning, skimming, reading for comprehension and reading for critical evaluation) to learners both at beginner and intermediate levels. Finally, the article has highlighted the importance of developing skills such as reading for comprehension and critical evaluation especially in intermediate learners to make them proficient readers who would contribute to promote a literate society in their respective communities by reducing illiteracy rate which can have dire consequences in a given society both socially, culturally and economically.

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