Reading

It is sometimes said that people nowadays (especially younger people) don't read as much as they used to. While it might be true that fewer of us are reading lengthy novels, the reality is that we are probably reading more than ever. In our daily life we read text types such as emails, notes, text messages, reports, signs, notices, leaflets and instructions.

Knowing what kinds of texts your students need to read in English is a useful way to plan a programme of reading for a course. Most people also accept that reading in general is a good way to improve a student's level of English. For this reason, English courses can strike a balance between what can be called 'intensive' and 'extensive' reading. Intensive reading often refers to reading a text for informational purposes and looking for key details. It's concentrated work which is often done in the classroom – for example, asking the students to answer comprehension questions about a text within a set time limit. Extensive reading, on the other hand, relates to reading for pleasure; in this case perhaps a student takes a longer text home such as a magazine or short novel.

Clearly, most of the time we spend teaching reading skills in the classroom focuses on intensive reading. The units in this section reflect that. After looking at 10 key points about teaching reading, you'll find units giving advice on how to check the students' comprehension and ways of developing higher-level reading skills. One reason that teachers seem to avoid doing reading in class time is that it never feels very communicative and it's something the students can do at home. However, the unit with activities for adding variety to reading should help to counter this belief. The final unit offers some suggestions for encouraging students to read more extensively by using graded readers or short novels that have been adapted for students at particular levels.

10 points to consider about reading

Teaching reading involves preparing students for reading a variety of text types in English. In order to do this, you'll need to help them to develop certain reading skills. Some of the points listed below are especially relevant to shorter, informational texts such as reading a leaflet with travel information. Other points relate to longer, more extensive reading.

1. Prediction

In our day-to-day reading, we normally choose the types of texts we want to read; for example, a particular article in a newspaper, information on a blog, the times of the buses to work. In other words, we often know something about the subject of the text before reading it or we already have a view on the topic of the text. So, too, in class it is important to find out what our students know about the topic of a text before they read it as this will activate any relevant vocabulary they already know. The process of thinking about the topic will make the text more accessible to them by encouraging prediction of the sort of information that might be in it. You can elicit ideas by showing them a photograph from the text or writing the title on the board and having them speculate what the text might be about.

2. Skimming

Skimming a text means reading it quickly to get the main idea (or gist). It's the equivalent of briefly looking over a variety of articles in a newspaper to get an idea of what they are all about before selecting one to read in more detail. In class, the first exercise in any reading lesson often asks the students to skim a text for the gist and report back to the class on the general ideas contained in it.

3. Scanning

Scanning means looking for a key word or a specific piece of information in a text. For example, if you are reading a train timetable, you don't read the entire timetable. You scan for the place and the time that you need. We tend to focus on this kind of skill when the students have to deal with texts containing information such as names, places, dates, times, etc.

4. Reading for detail

This type of reading skill is taught in many traditional reading lessons, where the students are expected to understand every word. Unlike skimming and scanning, it is slow and not always appropriate with every type of text. However, with a short story or a letter it might be.

5. Authentic texts

Using authentic texts can quickly demotivate students if they can't understand the meaning or purpose. One way to help them cope is to set questions which focus only on the language that they can understand in the text. In other words, you make the comprehension exercise easier in order to cope with a difficult text.

6. Adapted texts

Many teachers adapt authentic texts so the words are easier or closer to the students' level. The criticism of such texts is that they don't prepare the students for the real world. However, adapting texts so they are graded to the students' level makes them motivating to read and you can ensure that certain vocabulary or grammar items appear in context.

7. Dictionaries and guessing the meaning of vocabulary from context

If you give a student a reading text, as soon as they meet a word they don't know, they often look it up in a dictionary. The problem here is that it can slow their reading speed down and doesn't take advantage of the fact that often they can guess the meaning of a word from the context. This is a useful skill and a helpful strategy for increasing their range of vocabulary. One way to encourage guessing the meaning from context is to have students continue reading beyond the unknown word because subsequent sentences may contain more information relating to it. For example, it might be paraphrased or may become clear that the word has a positive or negative meaning. Another exercise that encourages the students to guess the meaning from context is to give them a list of definitions of words in the text. Ask the students to read the text and try to find and match words to the definitions.

8. Discovering grammar via the text

After the students have read a text for meaning, many teachers and course materials use it as a vehicle for teaching grammar. They do this by guiding the students towards certain sentences in the text which contain a particular grammar item. As with guessing the meaning of a new word from context in 7, students can often understand the meaning and use of a new grammar item because it appears within the more authentic context of a longer text rather than being presented in isolation.

9. Reading aloud or quietly

A traditional way of teaching reading in the past was to get each student to read part of a text aloud until everyone had read a section of it. Even today, some teachers still use this technique. The danger is that while one student is reading, the others are not concentrating on the text and may be doing something else entirely, rather than listening to the reader. It can be quite challenging and stressful for the person doing the reading, and also when we read aloud, we tend not to think about what it is that we are reading. It is often far better to allow the students to read a text quietly on their own. This means that everyone is involved in reading the whole text, it takes less time and it can be much more effective.

10. Reading for pleasure and interest

Given the need to develop the students' reading skills and get them through their exams, it is easy to forget that reading should also be pleasurable. Sometimes, you don't have to set comprehension questions and test every aspect of reading. Perhaps the students could choose a short book (see Unit 47) to take home and read in English or they could find a text on the internet that interests them. They could then bring it to class and explain why they chose it.

In order to check the students' understanding of a reading text, teachers often give them an exercise with about six to eight comprehension questions (though the number will vary, depending on the length of the text). These questions can take different forms. To illustrate the 10 main types of comprehension questions, here is the first part of a longer informational text. Below it you can read different examples of questions that would check the students' comprehension of this text.

Dolphins are one of the most easily recognisable sea creatures on Earth. Perhaps they are best known for their intelligence and playfulness. They often feature in stories from ancient Greek and Hindu mythology and they also appear in contemporary stories and films. Often they are portrayed in these as being able to 'talk' to people. In fact, dolphins can produce a wide range of sounds, allowing them to communicate both with each other and also with humans.

1. True/false statements

These statements are designed to make the students check if a detail or aspect of the text is true or false.

1. *There are ancient stories about dolphins. True / False*
2. *Dolphins are silent creatures. True / False*

2. Answer Yes, No or Don't know

This comprehension question is a closed question requiring only a short 'Yes' or 'No' answer. Alternatively, it might ask about information which isn't in the text so the answer is 'Don't know'. This kind of question encourages the students to read for evidence, rather than assuming the information is in the text.

1. *Does the writer think most people know what a dolphin looks like? Yes / No / Don't know*
2. *Does the writer suggest that dolphins' intelligence is a myth? Yes / No / Don't know*
3. *Did the ancient Chinese write about dolphins? Yes / No / Don't know*

(Answers: 1. Yes, 2. No, 3. Don't know)

3. Open questions

These questions require the students to find a word or phrase in answer to them.

What are dolphins best known for?

Who can they communicate with?

4. Multiple choice

This style of question often appears in tests and examinations, as well as in the classroom. The students are given a choice of possible answers.

How do dolphins communicate?

A. *With colour*
B. *With sounds*
C. *In writing*

5. Note-taking

You can give the students headings and they have to write down any relevant notes related to the heading. For example:

- *In history and culture*
- *Reasons they are well known*
- *Communication*

This is an especially useful comprehension task for students who might need to develop note-taking skills.

6. Write in the missing word

The comprehension task can be to find a word from the text and complete a sentence.

1. *Dolphins are creatures that live in the _____.*
2. *They use _____ to communicate with each other.*

7. Remove sentences

With reading texts, you can remove five or six sentences from the whole text and ask the students to try to guess where the sentences go. Alternatively, you can offer three sentences for each gap and the students choose the correct sentence. For example:

Dolphins are one of the most easily recognisable sea creatures on Earth. Perhaps they are best known for their intelligence and playfulness. They often feature in stories from ancient Greek and Hindu mythology and they also appear in contemporary stories and films. (1)____. In fact, dolphins can produce a wide range of sounds, allowing them to communicate both with each other and also with humans.

A. *Some people are against keeping dolphins in captivity.*
B. *Often they are portrayed in these as being able to 'talk' to people.*
C. *Fishermen often catch them in their nets by mistake.*

8. Gapped text

Sometimes reading texts are given to students with gaps in. Arguably, this kind of exercise doesn't test understanding of the meaning of the reading, but it can be a useful test of language level. Typically, the gapped words tend to be smaller grammatical or lexical items.

Dolphins are one of (1)_____ most easily recognisable sea creatures on Earth. Perhaps they are (2)_____ known for their intelligence and playfulness. They often feature in stories from ancient Greek and Hindu mythology and they also appear (3)_____ contemporary stories and films.

9. Summarise the paragraph

Write a choice of three sentences. The students have to choose the one which best summarises a paragraph or section of the text.

A. *Lots of people like dolphins because they are friendly.*
B. *Dolphins are well known for a number of different reasons.*
C. *Dolphins are in danger from human activity.*

10. Write your own comprehension questions

You don't always have to write the questions. You can ask the students to write their own questions about the text and then swap them with a partner. They try to answer each other's questions.

10 tasks for higher-level reading

The following tasks tend to work well with intermediate or advanced students. They are especially useful if you are using a reading text in which the author both presents information and expresses views or opinions. For example, you could take a text from the comments section of a newspaper or, if your students are studying English for academic purposes, you could use the kinds of texts they might need to read in English at university. All the tasks go beyond using the basic type of comprehension question (see previous unit), encouraging the students to read the text more deeply and to assess the author's position.

1. What's the source?

Brainstorm different types of places to read texts; for example, a newspaper, a book, on the web, in a magazine, etc. Alternatively, bring in a selection of texts from different sources and ask the students to identify the source for each one. Then ask them to look at the text you plan to work on in the lesson and ask where they think it came from.

2. How reliable is it?

Following on from the task in 1, ask the students which of the texts listed they would describe as reliable sources which contain factual information and which they think might be less reliable. For example, a text taken from a university textbook is probably reliable, whereas a text taken from a newspaper might contain more of the author's own opinion. After some discussion, ask the students to look at the text and say how reliable they expect the information to be.

3. Reacting to the text

Write these sentence openers on the board:

I think the author wrote this because...

One thing that surprises me about the text is...

One opinion I agree (or disagree) with is...

Tell the students to read the text and then complete the three sentence openers. Ask them to compare their responses with each other and talk about any ways in which their responses were different. This is a useful technique to encourage them to express their own views on a text.

4. Arguments for and against

If the article presents the pros and cons of something, ask the students to read and list what these points are. Alternatively, if the article only presents one side of an argument, ask the students to list those arguments and then discuss and think of a similar list of opposing arguments and opinions.

5. Find the evidence

If the author has expressed an opinion, ask the students to look back through the text and underline the evidence which is given to support it. This activity quickly allows them to see if the text is based on evidence or not.

6. Fact or opinion?

Choose three or four sentences from the text and write them on the board. Ask the students if they think the author is expressing a fact or their own opinion. For example:

An estimated seven billion people live on the Earth.

The world will find it increasingly challenging to feed the hungry mouths of seven billion people.

The first sentence expresses a fact and the second is the author's opinion. Having demonstrated the idea, ask the students to read the text and underline examples of sentences expressing facts and circle those expressing opinions.

7. Emotional language

As a follow up to the activity in 6, write a sentence on the board which expresses a strong opinion and underline any language which marks it out as an opinion or is an example of highly emotional language. For example: *The world will find it increasingly challenging to feed the hungry mouths of seven billion people.* Then ask the students to look through the text for more examples of emotional language.

8. Write a title for the text

One way to have your students think about the writer's main aim or objective in the text is to remove the title. After the students have read the text, ask them to write a title for it. They can then compare their title with the original. Alternatively, ask them to write one sentence which summarises the main message of the text and compare their sentences with other students.

9. Summarise the text

A higher-level skill that will benefit students studying English for academic purposes is to ask them to read the text and summarise the main points in a single paragraph.

10. Presenting a summary

An alternative (or extension) to 9 is to ask the students to give a presentation which summarises the main points of the text. Each student can conclude by presenting their own feelings about the views of the author and saying whether or not they agree.

"I tell students to read what you really enjoy reading: cartoons, sports magazines, Harry Potter, thrillers. It doesn't matter as long as the content grabs your attention and makes you forget that you are actually reading in a foreign language. I am convinced this works – it did for me!"

Lisa-Nike Bühring, Germany

10 ideas to add variety to a reading lesson

People often think of reading as a quiet, solitary task, but here are 10 ideas for making reading a challenging, lively and interactive classroom activity.

1. Scrambled text

Cut up a text into nine or 10 sections. Short texts could be cut up sentence by sentence, longer texts paragraph by paragraph. Give the cut-up text to a group of students. They read it and put the sentences or sections in order. This reading task is a great way to ensure the students read deeply for meaning and learn to recognise the cohesion of a text.

2. Mixed-up messages

As a variation to the activity in 1, give the students a series of emails or text messages between two people. Mix them up so they are out of order. The students read the messages and try to put them in the correct order.

3. Similarities and differences

Find two texts of similar length which are about a similar topic but contain some different information. One way to do this is to look at the same news story as reported in two different newspapers. Alternatively, write one of the texts yourself so it includes differences. Put the students in pairs and give one student a copy of one text and the other student a copy of the other. Give them a time limit to read their texts. Then tell them to take turns to summarise their texts orally and to listen for similarities and differences between the two texts. When they have finished summarising and saying what they think the similarities and differences are, they read both the texts again and check if they were correct.

4. Find your place in the text

This activity is a combination of the techniques in 1 and 3. Cut up a text into six or seven sections. Put the students into groups with the same number of students as there are sections of the text and ask them to stand in a circle. Give each student part of the text at random. Give them a few minutes to read their text. Then ask them to take turns to report back to the group on the information in their part of the text. As each student speaks, the group has to decide the order of the original text. When they have decided on the correct order, get them to stand in line in that order, with the student who has the introduction first and the one with the conclusion at the end. Ask them to read out their sections to check their answer.

5. Treasure hunts

Choose a selection of information-rich texts (about 10), such as tourist leaflets or advertisements. Write a set of 20 questions based on the texts for the students to answer. Pin the texts up around the room. Put the students in pairs and give each pair a set of the questions. The students have to walk around the room, read the texts and find the answers. Make it competitive, with the pair that answers all 20 questions first being the winners.

6. Plays and scripts

Using short dialogues and scripts from plays and sketches can be a motivating way for students to read a text and then read it aloud or perform it in groups. Texts could be anything from a basic listening dialogue printed in the back of a coursebook to an extract from a well-known play. For example, I once met a teacher who often used parts of plays by Harold Pinter because although the meaning and the characters might be complex, the actual level of language used is not too high. Reading scripts like this can also act as a useful springboard into getting the students to write and perform their own work.

7. Instructional texts

Texts which explain how to do something are great if they are something the students can follow; the most obvious example is a recipe which students read and study and then try to cook at home. Another example is a text which describes how to do a magic trick. There are lots of short texts like this online. Print some out and ask the students to read and try them on each other in class.

8. Changing a text

If you have recently read a text together in class, bring it to the lesson again, but make 10 changes to certain information within it. For example, if the text was a short story, change some information about the main character or the plot. The students read the text and try to guess what has changed. After they have guessed, let them read the original text and compare. As a follow-up, ask them to rewrite the text again with their own ideas for changes.

9. Missing information

Make two copies of a short text with some facts and figures in, for example a short biography. Delete different pieces of factual information, such as a date or an important name, in each of the two texts, leaving a gap where the word or phrase is missing. The students work in pairs and each receive a different copy of the gapped text. They read their text and take turns to form and ask questions for their partner in order to find out the missing information. This activity encourages active reading as well as teaching the students to manipulate language into question forms.

10. Webquests

Webquests are an excellent way to encourage your students to search for and read texts online. The basic idea is that you present the students with a task and you suggest websites to visit which will help them. For example, working in groups, they have to research tourist information online about a particular country or city. After gathering the information online, they complete some kind of summarising task; for example, they could imagine they represent the tourist board of the place they researched and must give a presentation to the class based on the information they found.

10 graded readers and stories

To encourage students to read more widely, we can ask them to read a story or a short piece of fiction. Some publishers also sell 'graded readers', which are either original fiction written to include certain vocabulary to match a particular language level or they are shortened, adapted versions of classic literature; for example, you might find a version of *Frankenstein* written for learners at intermediate level. Students can read these kinds of books at home, as time in class will be limited, but it's also helpful to do some activities in class to encourage and support their reading. Some of the activities that follow lend themselves to a situation where all the students are reading the same book. Others will work where students are reading different titles.

1. The cover

Look at the cover of the book or any accompanying artwork. This can include an ebook which will also have a cover image. Discuss with the students questions such as:

- What does the image show?
- What do you think the book will be about?
- What type of book is it? (eg. a novel? a biography?)
- What type of people are the characters on the cover?

If students are reading different titles, they could each take turns to show the class the cover of their book and summarise their own answers to the questions above.

2. Summarise a chapter

Once students start reading the first chapter, you could begin by asking them to read and summarise it. This task will demonstrate whether they have read and understood the chapter and they can also write with their reactions to the text. If everyone in the class is reading the same book, ask them to summarise the chapter but to include three incorrect pieces of information. For example, if the main character wears an item of clothing that is a particular colour (eg. a black hat), the students could change the colour in their summary. Then they swap their summaries with a partner and they have to spot the three changes.

3. Put the chapter headings in order

For classes where the students are all reading the same book, write the chapter titles (where applicable) on the board but in the wrong order. The students try to put them in the correct order from memory. If the chapters don't have headings, write a short summary sentence for each chapter (eg. what happens) and use these instead.

4. Timeline of events

To summarise the main events chronologically, the students can draw timelines on large pieces of paper and make notes on what happens at each stage of the story. This is especially useful with books where the events are not necessarily told in chronological order but might include, for example, a character describing an event that happened in the distant past.

5. Interview a character

Ask the students to write 10 interview questions for one of the main characters in the story. Then they could role play a conversation, with one student asking the questions and the other pretending to be the character and answering.

6. A news report

The students choose an important event from their story and rewrite it as though it is a news story. They can include an attention-grabbing headline and write up the events in the style of a tabloid newspaper or they could write it as a radio news broadcast and then read it aloud to the rest of the class.

7. Watch the film version

If there is a film version of the book, you could play it for your students. While watching it, the students can make notes about any changes to the storyline or how the film version differs from how they imagined the book.

8. Plan a film adaptation

The students imagine that they are going to make a film version of the story they are reading. In groups, they discuss these questions:

- Will you change the name of the book for the film?
- Which famous actors will play the characters?
- Will you modernise it?
- Will you change any parts of the plot?

The groups present their plans to the rest of the class.

9. A quiz

Prepare regular quizzes checking that the students remember (or have read) certain parts of the book. If they have all read the same book, then this could be set up as a team competition, with teams answering questions and receiving points for the number of correct answers they get. Alternatively, the students can work together in groups and write their own quiz questions to ask other groups.

10. A review

The students write a review of the book, saying what they liked about the story or what they think could have been better. You could also do this orally, by setting aside part of a lesson to have the students give their opinions. If they have read different books, get each student to present their book and say whether they would recommend it and why (or why not).