

Towards More Effective Reading

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Abstract

There is a trend in recently published textbooks to incorporate learning strategies. Research has shown that this can contribute to the success of students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Although the learning strategies have been dealt with, there has been almost no reference to the learner styles that they reflect. All learners use strategies, but not necessarily ones that will improve their English. This study will show the crucial connection between learner styles and learning strategies in making EFL activities effective.

Connecting To Written Information

The new Israeli EFL Curriculum focuses on the significance of reading comprehension. One of the four domains in the document is "Access to Information". It states that pupils should be able to "obtain and make use of information in ... writing from a variety of sources and different media." At the Proficiency Level pupils are to "obtain and use information from unadapted ... written texts." Thus, proficient readers are expected to be comfortable with abstract information in long texts that use complex language to express meaning implicitly. Ideally, competent readers will deal comfortably with the way "rhetorical organization" and sophisticated text types influence the message in written material.

These goals may seem rather vague to teachers who have to face several classes of students on a daily basis. How can the students be brought up to these levels? What are the methodological changes that this curriculum indicates? How can each student be helped to move along the continuum from the "foundation level" to the "proficiency level"? The answer to these questions cannot be found in how much grammar to teach or which vocabulary words are the most frequently misspelled. The teaching of specific strategies to facilitate use of English has now been brought to the forefront. The students' individual learner styles will also determine how well they incorporate the strategies presented.

This paper combines an action research project and the problem of enabling students to become competent readers in light of the new curriculum. The process described shows how students that lack the reading comprehension skills cannot "access" information in a written text.

Even a native speaker of English needs to be taught how to decode the written text. No one is born with a broad knowledge of reading comprehension techniques. The recent EFL research also sheds light on the way students need to be taught.

Comprehension Quandry

In 1997, we began to use a 10th grade reader called *Story Roundup* (Kleiner-Brandiwein, Y., 1997) with two "Native Speakers" 9th grade classes at Kiriyat Hinuch Dror Junior High. There 74 students randomly placed in the two classes. Although they were not all really "native" in their English speaking they were on an exceptionally high level. A variety of reading comprehension activities had been integrated into these stories. Some students complained that they didn't understand the longer stories. Even though they didn't find the vocabulary to be too difficult, they had difficulty in doing some of the exercises. When they were required make an oral presentation describing a character in the story *Taste* (Kleiner-Brandiwein, Y.1997,) using specific adjectives and examples from the story, a few didn't feel confident that they could. Furthermore, 18 of the students had failed the unseen passage in the midterm exam, which included standard comprehension questions. It seemed odd that these things should happen to students at this level.

During the week of the oral presentations, a few students asked to do something else instead. One of these students even requested an exemption her from the assignment. No matter how often she had read it, she didn't understand it. Moreover, she had no clue how to begin preparing for an oral presentation about a character. It now became clear that she needed a specific plan to help her

Towards More Effective Reading

complete the assignment. First, she was told to choose a character to focus on. Then go through the story again and highlight any place where this name was mentioned. Finally, she was to read the sections highlighted and concentrate on the character.

After doing this she came in to inform me that she would try to do her presentation in the next lesson. In fact she did quite well. Later that day, she came to tell me that the “tip” I had given her had made the assignment easier. Since she had never highlighted information when reading a story before, it surprised her as to how much of a difference it made.

At this stage it was obvious that these students had to improve their reading skills before doing more reading portfolio activities or book tasks. If they were not able to read short stories effectively, then how could they deal with longer texts or whole books? Since only one student in the class had gotten 100 on these oral presentations and only 5 had gotten a grade above 90 on the written test, **all of them needed to expand their reading strategies.**

Issue Analysis

It was imperative that the reading strategies taught would be ones most useful to the majority of students. Consequently, it was necessary to find a way to diagnose the students’ learning styles and then find out about their reading habits. Then it might be possible to decide which reading comprehension strategies would be most appropriate to teach directly. It would be more effective to hone in on the strategies they were lacking than to arbitrarily teach global reading strategies. Afterwards it would be important to see if they utilized the strategies taught and how useful they found them. It was vital they report back after the teaching process.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Learner Styles and Learning Strategies

In 1993, Rebecca Oxford spoke at the International English Teachers Conference in Jerusalem. She made it clear that we must know “*how the learner actually learns.*”

Language learning styles are the general approaches students use to learn a new language. These are the same styles they employ in learning many other subjects and solving various problems. ... four central dimensions of language learning styles: the analytic-global aspect, sensory preferences, intuition-sensory/sequential learning, and the orientation toward closure or openness. ... Appropriate learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence in many instances. (Oxford and Scarcella, 1992)

Her lecture on learner styles and learning strategies had a profound impact on my work. Consequently I analyzed my work with her views and concepts in mind. In so doing, I realized that I had not always taken into consideration the individual needs of all of my students. Moreover I began to understand that without strategy instruction the students’ English might not improve. At this point, I realized that a variety of learning strategies could be found in the activities I had already created or used. Now my goal was to reach the different types of learners and present them with a wide range of strategies when training them in reading comprehension. This parallels Oxford and Scarcella’s *Tapestry* approach to reading instruction. (Oxford, R. and Scarcella, R. 1992) [...]

A Reading Comprehension Issue-- Assessment

The fact that these students began to show difficulty with reading when taking a written test, made it important to consider this as part of the circumstances. It could be that the process of answering questions about an “unseen” text passage was part of the problem.

Gordon and Hanauer (1995) studied high school students in Israel. They tried to evaluate the process of reading

Towards More Effective Reading

comprehension test taking from the point of view of the student. They found that this was not a passive activity for these students but a very active one indeed. *Regarding the issue of test validity, the results of this study imply that assumptions about the test-taking process in EFL comprehension tests need to be reevaluated. First, the assumption that the meaning that test takers have constructed from the text is static and that their mental model does not develop beyond the initial reading of the stimulus text cannot be supported. Accordingly, the assumption that the testing tasks tap this initial finite construction of meaning also cannot be supported. Furthermore, the assumption that the response to a testing task reflects the comprehension of the stimulus text alone must also be reconsidered. The findings of this study suggest that the test-taking process has to be seen within the framework of a dynamic mental model which is continuously developing.* (Gordon, C. M. and Hanauer, D. 1995)

They quote P. H. Johnston in "Assessment in Reading" from *The Handbook of Reading Research* (Pearson, P. D., et.al. 1984) who says, "the content we ought to be concerned about—the content we do not have in our current tests—relates to the processes employed in the performance of the reading test." Furthermore Gordon and Hanauer suggest that there should be alternative methods of evaluation that include interviewing students to gain more insight into their understanding of the text or the "mental model" they have constructed as they read.

Silver, Strong and Perini (1977) suggest that when teachers assess their students, they must consider whether each student has been helped to develop individually. Teachers should make up their own model of standards and expectations that takes the diversity of the student population into account.

The bottom line is that learning is a complex process and students learn in various ways. The teacher

who acknowledges and actively responds to these truths will facilitate learning success for more learners. The theorists and promoters of brain-based education, learning styles, and multiple intelligences can contribute to effective applications by pointing out the complimentary aspects of their work. The primary message should be the need for serious understanding of the learner and the learning process. (Burke Guild, P. 1997)

Considering Styles and Strategies

There is a trend in recently published textbooks, both in Israel and abroad, to incorporate learning strategies. Research has shown that this can contribute to the success of the EFL student. (Ehrman, M. 1996) Although the learning strategies have been dealt with, there has been almost no reference to the learner styles that they reflect. I decided to use part of a learning strategies assessment from the book *Understanding Second Language Learning Difficulties* (Ehrman, M. E. 1996.) In addition I used two sources to create a reading "habits" survey, from the articles "The Comprehension Strategies of Second Language Readers." (Block, E., 1986) and "30 Ways To Improve Reading" (Dawson, N., 1997). Although they do not contain questionnaires, they both have extensive lists of ideas about what skills good readers must be taught. (see Appendix "Reading Habits Survey" and "MSQ Part IIb: Personal Learning Techniques")

Action and Observation

In the beginning of April the students filled out the *Reading Habits Survey and MSQ Part IIb: Personal Learning Techniques*. They were asked to do to help them succeed at reading comprehension. I wanted to be able to reach students in a personal manner, so I asked them to put their names on the questionnaire. Since I wanted to know if my class of native speakers was different from the parallel class, I also asked my colleague to have her students do the

Towards More Effective Reading

survey. (Her students were the control group at this stage only; they're grades on the final unseen were to be compared to those of my class.)

First, the students filled out the *Reading Habits Survey*. There didn't seem to be any copying, although there was a bit of discussion between students during the process. Surprisingly many had never heard of the concept "skim through the text". A few students, most notably the rebellious ones or those that were not particularly interested in studying English, expressed the feeling that the whole exercise was idiotic. These children exclaimed that they knew how to read very well and that **none of the things listed were part of what they did when reading.**

On the other hand, there was little resistance to filling out the *Personal Learning Techniques* survey, although some vocabulary was new to them. A few other students were confused as to what was meant by "Mental images help me to remember." Some of them even asked my how a person could "talk" themselves through a task. I told those students that didn't understand, that then they probably weren't that kind of learner.

Once the surveys were completed and the task of evaluating them began. Later it would be easier to see how to continue the process. First and foremost, most of my students did not use many reading strategies. The average use of the 18 skills listed was very low. The strategies that were popular were:

1 Skim through the text for a summary,

12 Try to figure out what kind of text it is,

14 Read aloud sections that aren't clear,

18 Read the text straight through several times for more information

The strategies that were hardly ever used by anyone were:

6 Read the first paragraph and make up questions or predictions about the rest of the text,

7 Read the first line of each paragraph before reading the whole text and try to figure out the main idea of the whole text,

11 Read and make notes about the main ideas,

13 Make a map or chart of the most important information

Basically, the reading strategies that required the student to read for specific information were being ignored. That made it impossible for them to read texts of any variety effectively!

On considering the learning styles questionnaire, it was important that I get a general sense of the range of styles. Since it was not a comprehensive questionnaire and I could not have individual interviews with each child, my goal was to become more sensitive to the needs of all of them. It also interested me to find out if a student who was failing, could benefit from a specific a type of reading strategy. If a few of them were presented to the class as a whole, I hoped **all** students would improve.

There was a pattern among the weaker students in the sense that if they lacked strategies appropriate to their learning style, they did not succeed. For example, one student had indicated that she was an auditory learner, but she didn't use the reading strategy of reading aloud. Generally the visually oriented students marked that they would remember things better if they wrote them down. Unfortunately a large number of these children simply didn't take notes at all!

Consequently I chose to teach them 9 or 10 appropriate reading strategies during our lessons in May. The first "reading tips" lesson was to set the tone for the rest. Each student was to have a page of these tips written in their notebooks. I wrote them on the board and everyone copied them out. We discussed each one and I

Towards More Effective Reading

read them aloud more than once. The first three were:

1. *Read the questions before reading an “unseen” text.*
2. *Scan for headings, sub-titles, pictures and captions before reading a text*
3. *List or highlight new vocabulary words and then define them later.*

In order to help the visual learner remember these tips, I drew huge questions marks around the first tip, then I wrote “HEADING” in capital letters, “subtitles” in bold letters and drew a picture with a caption. Finally I put the word highlight in box to help them picture the process. Then the students were assigned a story in their book, “Careers in Conflict” in *Getting Into Things*, and use these strategies while doing homework.

In the next lesson, before going over homework, I asked them if they had used the strategies while reading. Many had used them and felt they has been helpful. After going over the answers to the questions and the theme of the text, I asked them to take out their “Reading Tips” pages and copy down 3 more.

4. *Read the 1st paragraph of a text and then the topic sentences of each paragraph, before reading the whole text.*
5. *Figure out what kind of text it is (for example, try to see if the text is humorous, factual, opinion, fiction or propaganda)*
6. *Map out the text.*

At this point in the lesson I asked them to copy the tips (I rewrote the previous 3 on their prompting). Next I showed them how to “map” a text using a story they had read earlier in the year, “Love in the Snow” in *Story Roundup*. Then I broke them up into groups and gave them crayons and A3 sized paper so that they could map out the story they had read for homework. This was a very lively activity and many really seemed to have fun drawing and coloring and being quite creative. I was consciously trying to

involve the visual as well as the hands on learner with this activity.

The final lesson on strategies was a supposed to be a review lesson before the end of term test in May. Once again I asked them to take out their “Reading Tips” pages and copy down a few more. I repeated the first 6 and then added:

7. *Get the main idea (or ideas) after looking over the text quickly.*
8. *Try to say it in your own words, “paraphrase what you’ve read” (for example, make up a new title for the text or summarize in your own words after reading a text.).*
9. *Read aloud sections that aren’t clear.*

We talked about using some of the previous tips to help get the main idea. They suggested new titles for a few of the texts and stories they had read. Finally, we discussed the fact that reading aloud might not be the best thing during a test. So we talked about “pretending” to read aloud in their heads to see if that might help. At this point I told them that they should go over these tips before the test, since there was really no other way to prepare for an “unseen”.

Conclusion

The most enlightening part came only **after** the final exam. At that time I asked them to fill out the “Reading Tips Survey”. (see Appendix “Reading Tips Survey”) With their grades and the results of this second survey calculated, I found out just how much the whole process had helped them. There was a marked increase in the reading comprehension average grade from 66% on the previous unseen to 81% on this one. Furthermore, the average grade of other class was only 71%.

	First exam—before strategy training	Second exam—after strategy training	exam average
Average for the class	66	81	73

Towards More Effective Reading

studied			
Average for the control group	66	71	69

The students said that they used more of these “tips” than they had before. The *Reading Habits Survey* showed that they hardly used any reading strategies, but the *Reading Tips Survey* showed that they had used several strategies quite often. Most notably they had used the following five:

1. *Read the questions before reading an “unseen” text.*
2. *Figure out what kind of text it is (for example, try to see if the text is humorous, factual, opinion, fiction or propaganda)*
3. *Get the main idea (or ideas) after looking over the text quickly.*
4. *Try to say it in your own words*
5. *Read aloud sections that aren’t clear.*

This whole process was very complicated and time consuming, but it definitely had tangible results. It made it possible to teach them things that they really needed and not just “shooting buckshot” or taking a chance that what I was doing would be helpful to them. To some extent it was irrelevant to know the exact learner style of each and every student, since both classes had about the same range of styles represented. This reinforces the textbook writing trend to include a variety of reading strategies. The fact that there was such a marked difference between the final

scores of the two classes, only underscores the importance of strategy training.

Moreover, it would be imperative to give this kind of a survey to all students having difficulty with reading. This could facilitate their progress and make it easier to tailor reading instruction to their specific needs. In the future such a process could help solve whole class or individual reading problems. In case the students were not native speakers, it would be helpful to have a Hebrew version to give them or interview them privately.

The rest of the English department at Dror High School became interested in the strategy training after hearing about the improved test results. In August of 1998, the focus for the teachers’ preparation days was on how to teach reading comprehension strategies. A plan to teach the strategies to the all of the students in the 10th grade, not just the Native Speakers, was made on the basis of the results of the surveys done. After the semester began, the teachers expressed the feeling that they had a tangible way to teach reading in class. It didn’t matter that the students were on a variety of levels, they all needed to improve in reading comprehension. This direct reading strategy training was also done for all 10th graders and reviewed with the 11th graders at the beginning of the 1999 academic year. The rewards of this study were definitely worth the effort!

References

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Towards More Effective Reading

APPENDIX

READING HABITS SURVEY



How often do you do the following when you read?

Always = 5 Often = 4 Sometimes = 3 Seldom = 2 Never = 1

- 1. Skim through the text for a summary
- 2. Skim through the text for important words and phrases
- 3. Think up questions about the text before beginning to read
- 4. List or highlight new vocabulary words and then define them
- 5. Begin to read, stop part way through and try to make predictions about the rest of the text
- 6. Read the first paragraph and make up questions or predictions about the rest of the text
- 7. Read the first line of each paragraph before reading the whole text and try to figure out the main idea of the whole text
- 8. Read the last paragraph of the text first and then try to predict what will be in the rest of it
- 9. Make an outline of the major points of the text
- 10. Highlight or underline important parts of the text while reading
- 11. Read and make notes about the main ideas
- 12. Try to figure out what kind of text it is (for example, try to see if the author is serious or writing humorously)
- 13. Make a map or chart of the most important information
- 14. Read aloud sections that aren't clear
- 15. Summarize material read in your own words after reading a text
- 16. Skim and scan a text backwards to get more information
- 17. Scan for sub-headings and read captions before reading a text
- 18. Read the text straight through several times for more information