

Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language

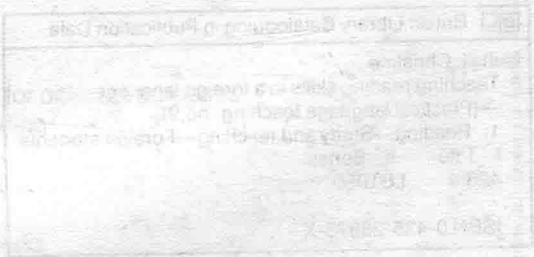
Christine Nuttall



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Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language

Christine Nuttall




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Preface

No book of this kind owes its existence to a single writer, and my debt to many others will be immediately obvious. First and foremost is the influence of the students and teachers with whom I have worked. To them, especially those at the Advanced Teacher Training College in Winneba, Ghana, I should like to dedicate the book, as a small return for all they have given to me.

It is impossible to mention here all those who deserve acknowledgement: the books I have read, the universities that have guided me, the colleagues who have shared their experience so generously. Their contribution has been so great that it seems impertinent that my own name should appear on the title page. I hope they will collectively accept this recognition that I am deeply aware of all I owe them and profoundly grateful.

I must however specifically mention certain materials produced as a result of the current renewal of interest in foreign language reading. For many insights and ideas for types of reading task, I have drawn freely on *English in Focus* (OUP), *Foundation Reading* (Chulalongkorn University Language Institute), *Reading and Thinking in English* (OUP) and *Skills for Learning* (University of Malaya/Nelson). Without the stimulus of these materials, this book would have been very different and much the poorer.

For help specifically with the text of this book, I should like to thank Alan Moore and John Moore for their time and trouble and their excellent suggestions; the publishers for their unfailing helpfulness; and finally, Gill Sturtridge and Marion Geddes for their support, without which the book would not have been written.

CEN
1981

A note to the reader

If this book seems somewhat long, I suggest that you first read Chapter 1 and then move straight to Chapters 11 and 12, which attempt to summarize the classroom application of the issues discussed in Chapters 2 to 10. You can then turn back to the earlier chapters for further details.

Abbreviations used in the text

EFL/ESL	English as a foreign/second language
FL	Foreign language (includes second language unless otherwise indicated)
he <i>etc.</i>	he or she <i>etc.</i>
L1	first language (mother tongue, native language)
MC	multiple choice (question)
NVM	non-verbal material (Chapter 5)
OHP	overhead projector
SPQ	signpost question (p. 158)
SQ3R	study, question, read, recite, review (p. 169)
TAS	text attack skill (Chapters 7, 8)
T/F	true/false (question)
w.p.m.	words per minute

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1 What is Reading?

This book is about reading a foreign language (FL) and particularly about reading English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL). Since it is a book for teachers, we shall be dealing mainly with the place of reading in a teaching programme, though whether it is possible to teach people to read is a vexed question, as we shall see.

A great deal has been written about reading, though most of it does not relate to the reading of a FL; and a great deal of research has been done, though its classroom applications are not always clear. I cannot attempt complete coverage of such a vast topic, but we will discuss some of the current ideas about reading and see how they can be applied in the FL classroom.

I shall make practical suggestions for the classroom, but many people would say that in the reading class it is the teacher's understanding of the reading process that is more important than anything else. It certainly seems to be true that some of the things that happen in the classroom may interfere with reading rather than promote it. So in this first chapter we will consider the process of reading. The conclusions we reach will supply the basis for the rest of the book.

1 Defining reading

Different people use the term *reading* in different ways, and much confusion can arise from consequent misunderstandings. So we had better start by making sure that we are thinking about the same thing when we use the term.

As a first step, it would be useful to find out what preconceptions you have about reading. Will you therefore please take a piece of paper and write down a brief definition of the term *reading*? Don't take more than five minutes over this.

Don't turn the page until you have written your definition of reading.

What sort of definition did you give? It is likely that you used words from at least one of these groups:

- (a) understand interpret meaning sense etc.
- (b) decode decipher identify etc.
- (c) articulate speak pronounce etc.

If you used the ideas reflected in group (b), you have probably wanted to include the first thing of all about reading: namely that unless we can correctly recognize the words we meet in print, we cannot even begin to read. The process of identifying written words is mainly the concern of the teacher of early reading and will not be dealt with in this book. We are concerned with developing the skills of readers who have already passed this elementary stage.

If you used words similar to those in group (c), you are probably drawing on your own experience as both a student and a teacher. In a great many classrooms the reading lesson is used as an opportunity to teach pronunciation, encourage fluent and expressive speaking, and so on. For early readers, reading aloud is of course an important aid; beginners have to discover how writing is associated with the spoken words they have already learned to use. But the early reading stage does not last long – two or three years at most, normally. What is the function of reading aloud after that? I will return to this question shortly.

Before we deal with words in group (a) and others with similar meanings, it would be helpful if you would now jot down on your piece of paper a list of the kinds of things you have read during the last few days, in any language.

Take five minutes to list all the different kinds of things you have read recently.

Don't forget to include things like these:

- telephone directory
- label on medicine bottle
- street map
- timetable
- notices
- statistics
- engagement diary
- letters
- instruction leaflet
- application form

How many of the things on your list were written in English (or whatever FL you are interested in)?

2 Reasons for reading

2.1 Reading in different ways for different purposes

Now think about the things you have listed. Why did you read each one? What did you want to get from it? Was it information only? What about the letters from home? The detective novel? You will find that you had a variety of reasons for reading, and if you compared notes with other people, you would find different reasons again.

How did your various reasons for reading influence the way you read? Did you read the telephone directory in the same way as the newspaper? What was the difference? How about street maps, diagrams, graphs or statistics? We speak of reading these, but it is very unlike the reading of a book: there may be very few actual words in reading of this kind.

You will probably have concluded that the way you tackled the task is strongly influenced by your purpose in reading. The quick scanning of a page in the telephone directory to find a single name is very different from the careful attention you paid to each word in a legal document. The difference in the speeds you used was no doubt very noticeable. Did you also find that for some tasks you read silently while for others you read aloud? What were the reasons that led you to articulate what you read?

For most of us, once we have passed the early reading stage, reading aloud is not common outside the classroom. Most of our reading is done silently, unless there are special circumstances such as reading to someone who has lost their spectacles. Since you are a teacher, reading aloud will be a skill you use quite a lot: but how much do you use it outside your job? And how many of your students are going to need this skill? If you think of the percentage of time most adults spend on reading aloud, compared with the time spent reading silently, you may feel you should adjust the proportion of class time spent on each.

2.2 Authentic reasons for reading

To return to the list of things you have read and your reasons for reading them: whatever the reasons were (and excluding any reading that was directly concerned with language learning), it is unlikely that you were interested in the pronunciation of what you read except in a tiny minority of cases, and it is even less likely that you were interested in the grammatical structures used. You read because you wanted to get something from the writing: facts, ideas, enjoyment, even feelings of family community (from a letter): whatever it was, you wanted to get the message that the writer had expressed. You were interested in what the writing meant; hence the sort of words we found in group (a) turn out to be the most important ones if we are thinking of a definition of reading that covers the most usual authentic reasons for reading. (We use the term *authentic* to mean reasons that are concerned not with language learning but with the uses to which we put reading in our daily lives outside the classroom.)

2.3 Why do you read the FL?

At this point we must face a major problem. If none of the items of reading on your list were written in the FL, it may be that you, and your students too, do not really need to read in the FL at all. If so, you may feel that the discussion that follows is irrelevant to you. But let us analyse the nature of the difficulty.

If your students have no need to use the FL outside the classroom, then the only function of the FL for them seems to be: to be learnt. Similarly, the only reason for reading it is: to learn to read it. This is sterile and self-defeating and we ought not to be surprised if student motivation is low. But it remains true that the FL exists because it is used, just like any other language. And FL users read their language for the same sort of reasons that you had for reading the items on your list.

Your problem is not that nobody reads the FL for authentic reasons, but that your students do not. And this is a problem of motivation. We cannot simply dismiss it, for it is the central problem for many language teachers, but it is a problem of educational policy and organization and therefore largely outside the scope of this book. Later on we shall be making various suggestions that may help to increase motivation by making FL reading interesting in itself; but nothing can replace the motivation supplied by needing to read. If you can, therefore, draw to your students' attention the sort of purposes for which they might conceivably find FL reading useful outside the classroom. And you can try to give them reading materials that reflect the authentic purposes for which people do read. This will help them realize that reading is not just a linguistic exercise but is involved with the getting of meaning out of a text for some purpose.

3 Getting a message from a text

It is reading of this kind that we are concerned with in this book. As we have seen, other meanings of the word *reading* exist, but we shall exclude from consideration any activity that does not have as its main purpose the extraction of meaning from writing. Our business is with the way the reader gets a message from a text. So we should establish what we mean by a message.

4 The communication process

Figure 1 gives a very simple model of the process of communication. On the left is the writer; but since he could equally well speak his message, we will use the more general term *encoder* for his role. The encoder has a *message* in his mind (it may be an idea, a fact, a feeling, an argument, etc.) which he wants somebody else to share. To make this possible he must first put it into words: that is, he must *encode* it. Once it is encoded, in either spoken or written form, it is available outside his mind as a *text*. The text is accessible to the mind of another person who hears or reads it, i.e. who *decodes* the message it contains. Once it is decoded, the message enters the mind of the decoder and communication is achieved.

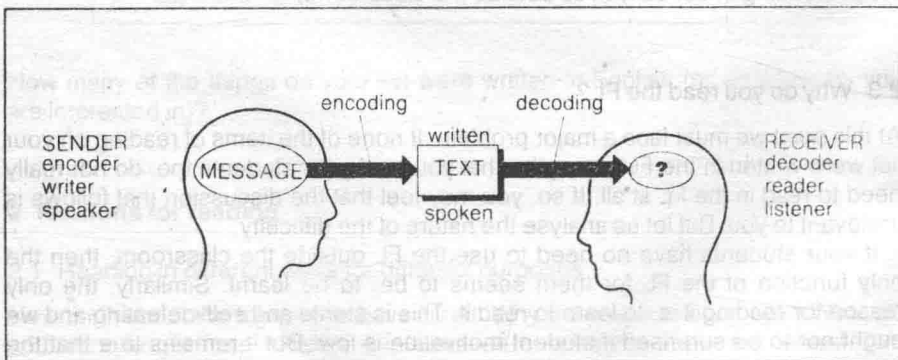


Fig. 1 The communication process

Obviously this model is too simple, for things can go wrong at any stage in the process. That is why I have put a question mark in the decoder's mind, for we cannot be sure that he has received the message that was intended. However, the process is clear enough for us to say that reading means getting out of the text as nearly as possible the message that the writer put into it. We shall need to consider in a little more depth the part played by the writer, the reader and the text itself in this process; and we will start with the reader.

4.1 Is the reader's role passive?

Figure 2 illustrates one fairly widely held view of reading. The text is full of meaning like a jug full of water, and it can be poured straight into the reader's mind which soaks it up like a sponge. In this view, the reader's role is a passive one; all the work has been done by the writer and the reader has only to open his mind and let the meaning pour in.

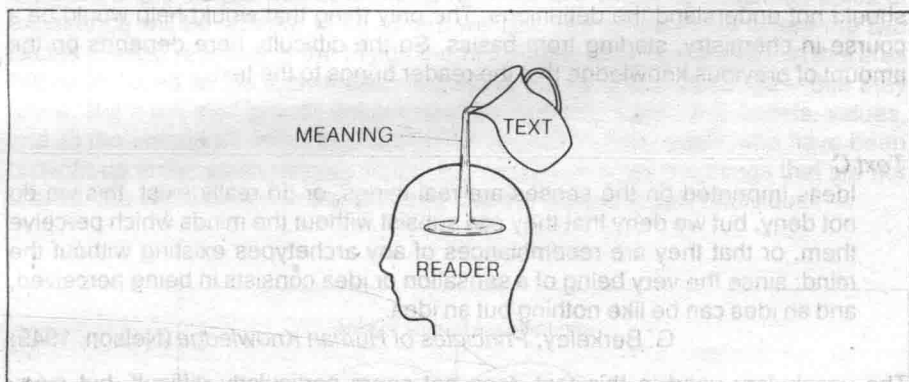


Fig. 2 One view of reading

Why do we reject this? One obvious reason is that it seldom happens like this. Not all the meaning in the text actually gets into the reader's mind; the figure should show at least some of the water trickling – if not streaming – down the reader's face. The fact that the meaning is in the text is unfortunately no guarantee that the reader will get it out, for we know from personal experience that a text that seems easy to one person may seem difficult to another.

4.2 What makes a text difficult?

To throw some light on the question, we will examine some texts that many people would find difficult.

Text A

Istuin eräänä tammikuun loppupäivänä Tiitin kanssa Kokkolasta Jyväskylään kulkevassa linja-autossa. Oli kiroeä pakkasilma, taivas oli kirkas, ja aurinko heitti lumihangille ja tien poikki puiden pitkeä sinisiä varjoja.

·Y. Kokko, *Ne Tulevat Takaisin* (Werner Söderstrom OY, 1954)