

Developing Reading Skills

**A practical guide to
reading comprehension
exercises**

Françoise Grellet

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comprehension exercises

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To the reader

Who the book is for

This book was written with teachers and material developers in mind. It should be useful to teachers who do not use a reading course and who wish to produce their own material, as well as to people who are developing material for tailor-made courses. It may also be useful to teachers using a course which they wish to enrich.

What the book is about

The book attempts to describe and classify various types of reading comprehension exercises. It is not a textbook for students or a general handbook on reading. The exercises provided in the book are cited as examples and ought not to be used indiscriminately: they are illustrations of different exercise-types. It is the principle underlying each exercise which is of the greatest importance to the teacher and materials writer.

This explains why the book is not designed for any particular level. The level of difficulty of the texts is unimportant here: the exercise-types suggested can be adapted for elementary, intermediate or advanced levels. What is important is the degree of complexity of the *tasks* the students are asked to perform in relation to the text.

INTRODUCTION

Reading and reading comprehension

What is reading comprehension?

Understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible. For example, we apply different reading strategies when looking at a notice board to see if there is an advertisement for a particular type of flat and when carefully reading an article of special interest in a scientific journal. Yet locating the relevant advertisement on the board and understanding the new information contained in the article demonstrates that the reading purpose in each case has been successfully fulfilled. In the first case, a competent reader will quickly reject the irrelevant information and find what he is looking for. In the second case, it is not enough to understand the gist of the text, more detailed comprehension is necessary.

It is therefore essential to take the following elements into consideration

What do we read?

Here are the main text-types one usually comes across:

- Novels, short stories, tales; other literary texts and passages (e.g. essays, diaries, anecdotes, biographies)
- Plays
- Poems, limericks, nursery rhymes
- Letters, postcards, telegrams, notes
- Newspapers and magazines (headlines, articles, editorials, letters to the editor, stop press, classified ads, weather forecast, radio / TV / theatre programmes)
- Specialized articles, reports, reviews, essays, business letters, summaries, précis, accounts, pamphlets (political and other)
- Handbooks, textbooks, guidebooks
- Recipes
- Advertisements, travel brochures, catalogues
- Puzzles, problems, rules for games
- Instructions (e.g. warnings), directions (e.g. How to use . . .), notices, rules and regulations, posters, signs (e.g. road signs), forms (e.g. application forms, landing cards), graffiti, menus, price lists, tickets

Introduction

- Comic strips, cartoons and caricatures, legends (of maps, pictures)
- Statistics, diagrams, flow / pie charts, time-tables, maps
- Telephone directories, dictionaries, phrasebooks

Why do we read?

There are two main reasons for reading:

- Reading for pleasure
- Reading for information (in order to find out something or in order to do something with the information you get).

How do we read?

The main ways of reading are as follows.

- Skimming: quickly running one's eyes over a text to get the gist of it.
- Scanning: quickly going through a text to find a particular piece of information.
- Extensive reading: reading longer texts, usually for one's own pleasure. This is a fluency activity, mainly involving global understanding.
- Intensive reading: reading shorter texts, to extract specific information. This is more an accuracy activity involving reading for detail.

These different ways of reading are not mutually exclusive. For instance, one often skims through a passage to see what it is about before deciding whether it is worth scanning a particular paragraph for the information one is looking for.

In real life, our reading purposes constantly vary and therefore, when devising exercises, we should vary the questions and the activities according to the type of text studied and the purpose in reading it. When working on a page of classified ads, for instance, it would be highly artificial to propose exercises requiring the detailed comprehension of every single advertisement. This would only discourage the students and prevent them from developing reading strategies adapted to the true purpose of their reading.

Reading involves a variety of skills. The main ones are listed below. (This list is taken from John Munby's Communicative Syllabus Design.)

- Recognizing the script of a language
- Deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items
- Understanding explicitly stated information
- Understanding information when not explicitly stated

- Understanding conceptual meaning
- Understanding the communicative value (function) of sentences and utterances
- Understanding relations within the sentence
- Understanding relations between the parts of a text through lexical cohesion devices
- Understanding cohesion between parts of a text through grammatical cohesion devices
- Interpreting text by going outside it
- Recognizing indicators in discourse
- Identifying the main point or important information in a piece of discourse
- Distinguishing the main idea from supporting details
- Extracting salient points to summarize (the text, an idea etc.)
- Selective extraction of relevant points from a text
- Basic reference skills
- Skimming
- Scanning to locate specifically required information
- Transcoding information to diagrammatic display

In order to develop these skills, several types of exercises can be used. These question-types can have two different functions.

1 To clarify the organization of the passage.

The questions can be about:

- the function of the passage
- the general organization (e.g. argumentative)
- the rhetorical organization (e.g. contrast, comparison)
- the cohesive devices (e.g. link-words)
- the intrasentential relations (e.g. derivation, morphology, hyponymy)

2 To clarify the contents of the passage

The questions can be about:

- plain fact (direct reference)
- implied fact (inference)
- deduced meaning (supposition)
- evaluation

The above skills, question-types and question-functions are constantly related since a given exercise uses a certain type of question, with a certain function, to develop a particular reading skill.

Some assumptions

There are a number of considerations to be borne in mind when producing or using reading comprehension exercises

- 1 Until very recently materials have concentrated on the sentence and units smaller than the sentence. This is still very largely true. It was assumed that a text was a succession of separate sentences thematically related and that it was necessary merely to deal with the structure and meaning of the sentences.

But, if reading is to be efficient, the structure of longer units such as the paragraph or the whole text must be understood. It is no good studying a text as though it were a series of independent units. This would only lead the students (a) to become dependent on understanding every single sentence in a text, even when this is not necessary to fulfil their reading purpose, with the result that they would tend to read all texts at the same speed and (b) to be reluctant to infer the meaning of sentences or paragraphs from what comes before or after.

- 2 It is clear, as a consequence of (1), that one should start with global understanding and move towards detailed understanding rather than working the other way round. The tasks given to begin with should be of a more global kind – within the competence of the students. Gradually, as they read more fluently and get the gist of a text more easily, a deeper and more detailed understanding of the text can be worked toward. Similarly, when constructing reading comprehension exercises on a given text, it is always preferable to start with the overall meaning of the text, its function and aim, rather than working on vocabulary or more specific ideas.

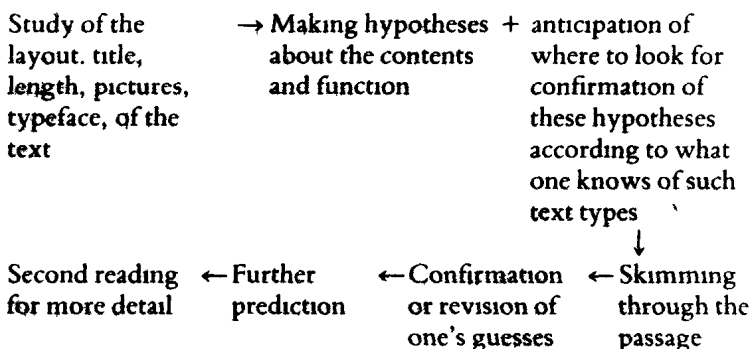
This treatment is important because

- a) It is a very efficient way of building up the students' confidence when faced with authentic texts that often contain difficult vocabulary or structures. If the activity is global enough (e.g. choosing from a list what function a text fulfils) the students will not feel completely lost. They will feel that at least they understand what the text is about and will subsequently feel less diffident when tackling a new text.
- b) It will develop an awareness of the way texts are organized (e.g. stating the main information and developing it, or giving the chronological sequence of events). It is this awareness of the general structure of a passage that will allow the students to read more efficiently later on.
- c) By starting with longer units and by considering the layout of the text, the accompanying photographs or diagrams, the number of paragraphs, etc., the students can be encouraged to

anticipate what they are to find in the text. This is essential in order to develop their skills of inference, anticipation and deduction.

Reading is a constant process of guessing, and what one brings to the text is often more important than what one finds in it. This is why, from the very beginning, the students should be taught to use what they know to understand unknown elements, whether these are ideas or simple words. This is best achieved through a global approach to the text.

One could sum up this kind of approach in the following way



3 It is important to use authentic texts whenever possible. There are several reasons for this.

a) Paradoxically, 'simplifying' a text often results in increased difficulty because the system of references, repetition and redundancy as well as the discourse indicators one relies on when reading are often removed or at least significantly altered. Simplifying a text may mean

- replacing difficult words or structures by those already familiar to the students
- rewriting the passage in order to make its rhetorical organization more explicit

– giving a 'simplified account', that is to say conveying the information contained in the text in one's own words

If a text is to be simplified at all, then techniques such as rewriting and simplified account seem to be preferable although they usually imply a change of rhetorical organization.

b) Getting the students accustomed to reading authentic texts from the very beginning does not necessarily mean a much more difficult task on their part. The difficulty of a reading exercise depends on the activity which is required of the students rather than on the text itself, provided it remains

within their general competence. In other words, one should grade exercises rather than texts.

- c) Authenticity means that nothing of the original text is changed and also that its presentation and layout are retained. A newspaper article, for instance, should be presented as it first appeared in the paper with the same typeface, the same space devoted to the headlines, the same accompanying picture. By standardizing the presentation of texts in a textbook, one not only reduces interest and motivation, but one actually increases the difficulty for the students. The picture, the size of the headline, the use of bold-face type, all contribute to conveying the message to the reader. It is obvious that a reprint will never be completely authentic, since a textbook consists of several texts taken out of context and juxtaposed. But one should at least try to keep them as authentic as possible in order to help the student anticipate meaning by using these non-linguistic clues.
- 4 Reading comprehension should not be separated from the other skills. There are few cases in real life when we do not talk or write about what we have read or when we do not relate what we have read to something we might have heard. It is therefore important, to link the different skills through the reading activities chosen
 - reading and writing, e.g. summarizing, mentioning what you have read in a letter, note-making, etc.
 - reading and listening, e.g. comparing an article and a news-bulletin, using recorded information to solve a written problem, matching opinions and texts, etc.
 - reading and speaking, e.g. discussions, debates, appreciation, etc.
- 5 Reading is an active skill. As mentioned earlier, it constantly involves guessing, predicting, checking and asking oneself questions. This should therefore be taken into consideration when devising reading comprehension exercises. It is possible, for instance, to develop the students' powers of inference through systematic practice, or introduce questions which encourage students to anticipate the content of a text from its title and illustrations or the end of a story from the preceding paragraphs.

Similarly, one should introduce exercises in which there is no single straightforward answer. This type of exercise has too often required students to exercise only their powers of judgement and appreciation, but extending the range of these exercises to cover other reading skills will lead to greater discussion and reflection on the text

A second aspect of reading as an active skill is its communicative function. Exercises must be meaningful and correspond as often as possible to what one is expected to do with the text. We rarely answer questions after reading a text, but we may have to

- write an answer to a letter
- use the text to do something (e.g. follow directions, make a choice, solve a problem)
- compare the information given to some previous knowledge.

The third section of this book 'Understanding Meaning' suggests a number of activities of this kind, to which should be added the use of written texts for simulations and the use of games (e.g. board games) based on the reading of short texts providing the necessary information for the moves of the players.

Another important point when devising reading comprehension exercises is that the activities should be flexible and varied. Few exercise-types are intrinsically good or bad. They only become so when used in relation to a given text. Reading comprehension activities should be suited to the texts and to one's reasons for reading them. It is essential to take into account the author's point of view, intention and tone for a full understanding of the text. This may be covered by open questions, multiple-choice questions, right or wrong questions, etc. In other cases, the text may naturally lend itself to a non-linguistic activity such as tracing a route on a map, or matching pictures and paragraphs. The aim of the exercises must be clearly defined and a clear distinction made between teaching and testing. Testing will obviously involve more accuracy-type exercises whereas through teaching one should try to develop the skills listed on pages 4–5.

The students must be taught how to approach and consider the text in order to become independent and efficient readers. It is also important to remember that meaning is not inherent in the text, that each reader brings his own meaning to what he reads based on what he expects from the text and his previous knowledge. This shows how difficult it is to test competence in reading comprehension and how great the temptation is to impose one's own interpretation on the learners.

Reading comprehension in the classroom

Constructing exercises

There must be variety in the range of exercises. This is an important factor in motivation and it is necessary if different skills are to be covered.

An exercise should never be imposed on a text. It is better to allow the text to suggest what exercises are most appropriate to it. In other words, the text should always be the starting point for determining why one would normally read it, how it would be read, how it might relate to other information before thinking of a particular exercise.

But it is important to remember that many texts are meant to be read and enjoyed, that too many exercises might spoil the pleasure of reading. A balance should be struck between leaving the students without any help on the one hand and on the other hand 'squeezing the text dry'.

Classroom procedures

The first point to be noted when practising reading in the classroom is that it is a silent activity. Therefore silent reading should be encouraged in most cases, though the teacher may sometimes need to read part of the text aloud. The students themselves should not read aloud. It is an extremely difficult exercise, highly specialized (very few people need to read aloud in their profession) and it would tend to give the impression that all texts are to be read at the same speed. Besides, when we read, our eyes do not follow each word of the text one after the other – at least in the case of efficient readers. On the contrary, many words or expressions are simply skipped; we go back to check something, or forward to confirm some of our hypotheses. Such tactics become impossible when reading aloud, and this reading activity therefore tends to prevent the students from developing efficient reading strategies.

It is useful to give the class some help on how to approach a new text. The following procedure, for instance, is very helpful with most texts.

- a) Consider the text as a whole, its title, accompanying picture(s) or diagram(s), the paragraphs, the typeface used, and make guesses about what the text is about, who wrote it, who it is for, where it appeared, etc.
- b) Skim through the text a first time to see if your hypotheses were right.

Then ask yourself a number of questions about the contents of the text.

- c) Read the text again, more slowly and carefully this time, trying to understand as much as you can and trying to answer the questions you asked yourself

Another classroom procedure can consist of helping the student to time himself and increase his reading speed little by little. It is necessary to reach a certain reading speed in order to read efficiently. This can be done by showing the students how to record their reading speed systematically on a chart and to try to improve it each time they read a new text.

To say that reading is a silent and personal activity does not imply that it only lends itself to individual work. On the contrary, it is particularly interesting to encourage comparisons between several interpretations of a text which will lead to discussion and probably a need to refer back to the text to check. Here are possible steps:

- a) Silent reading followed by an activity which each student does on his own.
- b) The students now work in pairs, each one trying to justify his answer. The group should try to agree on one answer or interpretation.
- c) The groups exchange partners and students compare their results.
- d) A general discussion involving the whole class may follow.

When to use reading comprehension exercises

Reading can be done as a class activity (see above) but reading activities can also be devised to individualize students' work at home. Instead of choosing one activity for the whole class, two or three sets of exercises of varying difficulty can be prepared based on the same text so that each student can work at home at his own level. If the text is then to be discussed in the class, each group of students who have worked on the same exercises will be able to talk about what they have done. This will certainly be stimulating for the weaker students, while the better ones will not feel held back.

If there is little teacher-control of the reading activity, then self-correcting exercises are extremely useful. The students are able to evaluate their work and can try little by little to improve their reading ability. They feel reassured and guided and using this type of material is one of the best ways of building up the students' confidence. (See *Multiread II* (S. R. A. Paris, 1973) and *Multiread A* (S. R. A. London, 1977))

Reading comprehension exercise-types

Reading techniques

1 SENSITIZING

- 1 Inference: through the context
Inference: through word-formation
- 2 Understanding relations within the sentence
- 3 Linking sentences and ideas.
reference
Linking sentences and ideas
link-words

2 IMPROVING READING SPEED

3 FROM SKIMMING TO SCANNING

- 1 Predicting
- 2 Previewing
- 3 Anticipation
- 4 Skimming
- 5 Scanning

How the aim is conveyed

1 AIM AND FUNCTION OF THE TEXT

- 1 Function of the text
- 2 Functions within the text

2 ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT DIFFERENT THEMATIC PATTERNS

- 1 Main idea and supporting details
- 2 Chronological sequence
- 3 Descriptions
- 4 Analogy and contrast
- 5 Classification
- 6 Argumentative and logical organization

3 THEMATIZATION

Understanding meaning

1 NON-LINGUISTIC RESPONSE TO THE TEXT

- 1 Ordering a sequence of pictures
- 2 Comparing texts and pictures
- 3 Matching
- 4 Using illustrations
- 5 Completing a document
- 6 Mapping it out
- 7 Using the information in the text
- 8 Jigsaw reading

2 LINGUISTIC RESPONSE TO THE TEXT

- 1 Reorganizing the information.
reordering events
Reorganizing the information.
using grids'
- 2 Comparing several texts
- 3 Completing a document
- 4 Question-types
- 5 Study skills: summarizing
Study skills: note-taking

Assessing the text

1 FACT VERSUS OPINION

2 WRITER'S INTENTION