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Working with texts in the English lessons

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BEFECTETÉS A JÖVŐBE

1. Introduction

When teaching a foreign language, we constantly work with aural or written texts, which serve a variety of purposes. In the present material the focus is on the many roles written texts play in the teaching / learning process. We are going to overview

- what knowledge is necessary for learners to be able to understand a text,
- what teachers (and coursebooks) can do to aid the process of comprehension before, while and after reading a text and
- how texts can be exploited for language work, once they are read and understood by the learners.

2. Text comprehension

2.1. What goes into understanding a text?

In order to make sense of a text that you read, you need have recourse to different kinds of knowledge in your brain. Here is a possible list of the kinds of information that we have compiled in a lifetime and now store in our brain - and set into motion when we are trying to understand a text, (adapted from Hedge 2000:189)

1. *Linguistic knowledge* – the knowledge of the meanings of words, the morphological and syntactic rules of the language (“grammar”), and the rules of discourse (coherence, cohesion, logical structuring of a text)
2. *General world knowledge* – through schooling, reading, television and simply living an everyday life, we receive and store a vast amount of information about the world in our mind
3. *Topic knowledge* – the knowledge of information about and the specific language of the topic of the text that we are dealing with. Obviously, we navigate easier in texts about topics that we are familiar with, because we know the background facts, we have our personal opinions, and we have been exposed to the language of it to a greater extent.

Now open **Task 1** and follow the instructions. Also, study the **Key** carefully.

The purpose of this analytical task is to raise your awareness of the kinds of preparation that your learners need in order to understand a text that you make them read.

2. How to aid comprehension

The reader engages in a very complex task of making sense of the text. Foreign language learners can often find this overwhelming and need therefore the teacher’s guidance and assistance. Course material writers nowadays know this and thus incorporate in the material exercises that are designed to fulfil exactly this aim. Part of these activities are meant to be performed before the learner starts reading the text, preparing the learner for the reading experience. The other part of the coursebook exercises require the students to work with the text – either while or after reading it.

2.1 Before reading the text

A) Linguistic knowledge

An important prerequisite for the successful comprehension of a text is that the learner can understand the meaning and usage of most, if not all, of *the grammar and vocabulary* that the text contains. The general understanding is that a reading text can and should be at a slightly higher level than the level of the language that the learner can currently produce on his or her own. This creates something that we might call *gaps* between the language of the text and that the learner is already comfortable with. If these *gaps* are not too wide, a successful reader can *bridge* them with no particular difficulty, applying two basic strategies:

1. *Guessing the meaning of the unknown items* from the context, as well as their existing knowledge of the language and the world in general – which is a useful way of stretching the learners' linguistic limits and practising reading strategies;
2. *Ignoring* whatever they were not able to guess and making do with that part of the text that they were able to decipher – which fosters in the learner a kind of tolerance for the feeling of not being able to understand one hundred percent of what is read. As this is generally the case in real life reading experiences, a bit of psychological preparation comes in handy.

If the teacher finds the text too dense in terms of new vocabulary, he or she can decide to teach a bunch of unfamiliar items before the learners start reading the text. This technique is called *pre-teaching vocabulary*. Do not overuse it, however: as we said above, both guessing from various types of existing knowledge and the ability to tolerate some remaining not-quite-clear bits are valuable tools that you might want to equip your learners with.

B) General and topic knowledge

The teacher and/or the course material can aid comprehension greatly by *brushing up and activating the existing general and topic knowledge of the learner* on one hand, and *supplying additional bits of knowledge* on the other. The general understanding in cognitive psychology is that previous knowledge of the topic is one of the main factors that aid text comprehension – and I am sure you have plenty of own experience regarding the difference between reading an English text about a subject matter that you are familiar with and one that you are not! The text might have the same level of difficulty in terms of the language itself, but you have a much higher chance of making sense of it if you are at home in the field that it is about. In the same way, your learners benefit a lot from some topic preparation before they start reading the text. Similarly, a lot of teachers have the experience that simply raising interest and curiosity about the topic can promote comprehension. *Being interested in the text, feeling motivated to read it acts as a kind of catalyst in comprehension: the reader's mind is much more receptive and therefore more successful at processing the text.*

It has also been found (and widely exploited in coursebooks) that if learners are asked to predict the content of the text, they have a higher chance of successful comprehension.

In **Task 2** you are going to see examples for pre-reading activities. Please open the task and follow the instructions. Also, study the **Key** carefully.

2.2 While reading the text

In Section 2.1 above you learnt about how to guide your learners towards better comprehension prior to actually starting to read the text. After a few pre-reading activities, the learners are primed and prepared for the reading experience. The teacher and the coursebook material can, however, further assist them in the process, even while reading.

In the following, you are going to read about some aspects that you need to consider.

A) Who does the reading

Who actually reads the text (the teacher or the learner) and how (silently or aloud) can have a profound impact on both the enjoyment value and the success of the reading experience.

Three practices are prevalent in English courses:

1. The students take turns reading out one or two sentences each.
2. The teacher reads out the whole passage (or the text is recorded and the teacher plays the audio file) and the learners follow the text with their eyes silently.
3. The learners read the text to themselves silently.

Before reading on, open **Task 3** and think about the advantages and disadvantages of each procedure. Jot down your thoughts and then compare your notes with the insights in the **Key**.

B) Dealing with unknown vocabulary while reading

An important reading subskill is *coping with unfamiliar language items*. If you base the course that you are teaching on a carefully designed, quality coursebook, the reading texts are unlikely to contain either too difficult unfamiliar grammar structures or a heavy load of unknown vocabulary. Consequently, the idea is that any new words that the text contains are *either ignorable* as they should not pose difficulty in computing the meaning of the text, *or are there for the learner to guess*.

As explained in 2.1.A above, both are valuable skills to learn on the way to becoming a successful reader. The learner needs to develop the skill of being able to tell important words from unimportant ones, and they definitely need to perfect their skills at guessing the meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary from their previous knowledge or from contextual clues. In real life experiences of reading English texts (what we are preparing them for in the language lessons), dictionaries might not always be at their disposal or there might be no time to consult them.

Nation and Coady (1988:104-105 quoted in Hedge 2000:194) suggest a 5-step sequence to help learners develop guessing meaning from contextual clues or background knowledge:

1. *Finding the part of speech of the unknown word*
2. *Looking at the immediate context of the unknown word and simplifying this context if necessary*
3. *Looking at the wider context of the unknown word. This means looking at the relationship between the clause containing the unknown word and surrounding clauses and sentences.*
4. *Guessing the meaning of the unknown word*
5. *Checking that the guess is correct*

Nation and Coady (1988:104-105 quoted in Hedge 2000:194)

However, coursebooks are written for a general (and largely imaginary) audience. ***You know your learners the best – so it is your responsibility to study the upcoming reading text and decide***

1. *which words or phrases are likely to be unknown for them, and of these*
2. *which are the ones they are going to need the meanings of in order to make sense of the text, and*
3. *how the learner should ideally go about each of these and what your own role is in the process*

All in all we have mentioned three ways you might decide to deal with new words in the text:

1. *encourage your learners to ignore them as they are non-essential*
2. *make/help them guess the meaning*
3. *pre-teach some key vocabulary*

You might also *add a small glossary* to the text. If you decide to do so, do that with words that are very special and rare, and are therefore nearly impossible for the learner to guess and certainly not important for him to learn.

C) Comprehension questions as an aid

The primary role of comprehension questions is generally thought to be to check comprehension. However, their value in *assisting the reader in constructing the meaning* of the text should not be underestimated. Obviously, when the learners have done the comprehension tasks and get feedback from the teacher, it might clarify the parts that they did not understand or misunderstood. But *often the very formation of the questions offers the learners cues to understanding*, and in every case the questions help segment the reading passage into chunks.

Open **Task 4** and study the reading passages that we examined for the pre-reading tasks again, this time focusing on the comprehension tasks. Make sure you read and understand the **Key** as well.

D) Other types of comprehension tasks

In the sample units the reading texts were accompanied by basically three types of tasks:

1. skimming the text for gist before reading the text in detail,
2. scanning for specific information and matching it with the relevant part of the text,
3. answering comprehension questions (and discussing the answers).

There are other types of comprehension tasks that are often applied by ELT materials – their main purpose is, however, to check or test comprehension rather than accompany the learners during reading and offer them some support in the job of understanding the text.

Below are a few of *the most common types of checking types of comprehension tasks* – with an example for each

1. Multiple choice questions
2. True or false (and not mentioned) questions
3. Match the headings to the parts of the text
4. Fill in the gaps in a summary of a text

Take a look at coursebooks and exam materials that you have available and look for examples for the different types of checking comprehension tasks.



II. Exploiting the text for language work

A) Language exercises (vocabulary, grammar, discourse) to go with the text

Carefully constructed reading passages can serve as a great material to

- *revise / revisit and thereby consolidate hitherto learnt vocabulary, grammar and discourse elements,*
- *to present new vocabulary, grammar structures and discourse elements.*

Both aims are best achieved in some sort of context – and the reading test provides a brilliant context for such work.

What kind of language work you can exploit the text for depends largely on the current language knowledge of your group on one hand, your teaching aims (which, ideally, should correspond to their learning aims) on the other. All coursebooks can do is to offer a few ideas in the form of one or two language work exercises to go with each reading task. You can use these as models – and devise ones that suit your learners on your own.

Now open **Task 5** and look at the sample units again and find activities that aim that serve to consolidate or widen the learners' vocabulary, grammar or discourse elements. Please also check the **Key**.

As mentioned above, the language work activities provided by the coursebooks should only serve as samples and models – you know your learners the best, so it is your choice (and responsibility) to decide if you exploit the text for language improvement or not, and if so, what you are focusing on: teaching new words? Teaching or practising some grammar structure? Observing and practising how text organizers work in a text? Etc.

A valuable technique might also be to read the text aloud again at this stage of the lesson, i.e. after all the comprehension tasks have been completed, and drawing your learners' attention explicitly to some linguistic features (see also Hedge 2000:193).

B) Follow-up exercises

In addition to grammar, vocabulary and discourse exercises, the tasks accompanying the reading passages usually contain one or two follow-up exercises, which usually aim at improving writing or speaking skills, oftentimes promoting critical thinking in the process. The role of the reading text in these activities is the combination of springboard and model: they serve as the topic of the speaking or writing tasks, as well as a source of words and structures for the successful completion of them.

In making our learners complete these follow-up exercises we do not only exploit the reading text to its full potential, but also foster in our learners a feeling of making use of the whole reading experience (including the language works activities!) in a meaningful way. If the follow-up activity ties in perfectly with the reading text, the learners might realize that the reading experience was not only for the sake of reading, but lead to the improvement of their language production as well, which is an important learning goal for most students.

Look at the reading passages that you have worked with in **Tasks 2, 3, 4 and 5** and check out what follow up activities are offered accompanying the texts.



Summary

Having completed this material, by now you must have a good understanding of

- what roles texts play in the learning/teaching process
- what knowledge learners build upon when they try and understand a text,
- how the comprehension can be aided by different tasks and activities and
- what language work is necessary for learners (with the guidance of their teachers) to make full use of the text provided.

References:

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Hedge, Tricia. 2000. *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom* (Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers series). Oxford: Oxford University Press.