
UNIT 11 READING COMPREHENSION-I

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

What should you do with the help of this unit?

1. You should be able to relate the reasons for reading with the appropriate reading style.
 2. You should be aware of the teaching objectives and principles underlying reading comprehension activities.
 3. You should be aware of the three phases of a reading lesson and identify the questions belonging to each phase.
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11.1 INTRODUCTION

A simple definition of reading is that it is a process whereby one looks at and understands what has been written. The key word is 'understands' —merely reading aloud does not count as reading.

This definition does not mean that the learner needs to understand everything in a text. Understanding is not an 'all or nothing' process, and from it follows that reading is not an 'all or nothing process either'.

Again, although reading has been defined as a process whereby one looks at and understands what has been written, the reader does not necessarily need to look at everything in a given piece of writing. The reader actively works on the text and is able to arrive at understanding it without looking at every letter and word.

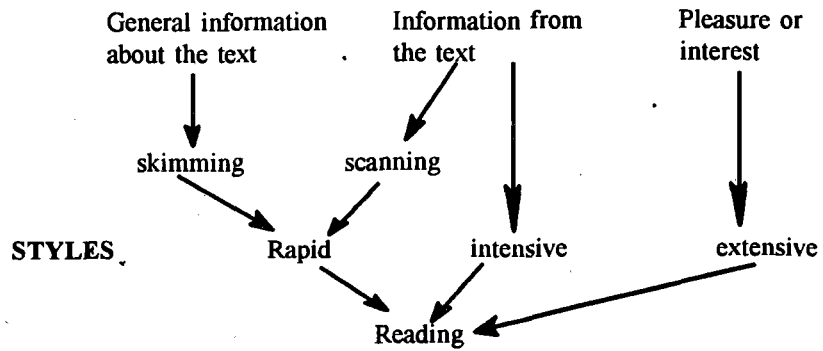
11.2 REASONS FOR READING AND READING STYLES

People generally do not read unless they have a reason for reading i.e. they have a need of some kind that can be satisfied through reading. Furthermore in case of an effective reader, his/her reason for reading will also influence his/her style of reading. The effective reader is one who is able to adapt his/her style to his/her purpose, and does not read everything slowly and intensively.

Learning language should not be an aim in itself — the ultimate aim is to be able to use language appropriately. It is therefore important to give learners practice in different reading styles. This is achieved not by telling learners to skim, read intensively, etc. but by setting tasks that encourage these styles.

The following diagram summarises the relationship between reasons for reading and various styles of reading

REASONS



Check Your Progress 1

Consider the following types of texts and write for each of them the reason for reading it and the style of reading used. One has been done for you.

text	Reason for Reading	Style of Reading Used
1. Railway time table	Looking for a particular piece of information	Scanning
2. Instruction for using a machine		
3. Newspaper article		
4. An extract from a novel		
5. Telephone directory		
6. A letter to the editor		
7. A notice		
8. A recipe		
9. A Poem		
10. Rules for playing a game		

11.3 READING COMPREHENSION AND TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

The important thing to remember is that the reading comprehension passage and the associated activities should promote skills in reading for understanding. The following are some important characteristics of 'understanding' and their implications of teaching reading comprehension.

1. All readers bring something with them to a text in terms of a general stock of knowledge. Knowledge of the world does not only cover knowledge of a particular topic, it may include knowledge of a particular topic, it may also include knowledge of a particular culture or way of life.

Teaching implications : Before reading the reading passage itself, one can draw on the learners' previous knowledge of the subject matter, their experience of life in general. (This is the purpose of warm up/ pre-reading activities).

2. One can understand something better if one puzzles out things for oneself. Advice and guidance are valuable. But true learning involves a large element of personal discovery, struggle and achievement. The outcome is that one is more confident and better equipped for further and more challenging tasks of understanding. The same is true of reading comprehension.

Teaching implication : Make students work out things for themselves. Don't spoon feed them by explaining the passage to them, but devise exercises so that they can work them out on their own.

3. Understanding some thing will be deeper and will last longer if one does something with the information one has just acquired. e.g. one will understand a recipe better if one has actually cooked the dish concerned. This is equally true of reading.

Teaching implication - There should be exercises and activities to get the learners to use this newfound knowledge and ideas.

4. In trying to understand, for example, directions on how to get to someone's house, you need to concentrate exclusively on what the directions are. Similarly, in reading, one needs to concentrate on reading for understanding and not get sidetracked into other aspects of the passage.

Teaching implications - In teaching reading comprehension, don't use the passages for the purposes of teaching pronunciation or grammar.

5. Understanding anything is not an 'all or nothing' process. Similarly, reading for understanding is not and 'all or nothing process' either.

Teaching implications- Don't aim at 'total comprehension' of every single word, sentence and item of content of a passage.

6. The ability to understand anything or anybody is made up of a variety of component sub-skills (e.g. anticipating what will come next, distinguishing main elements from the details, bringing together information from various sources). Reading, too, is composed of such sub-skills.

Teaching implications - Instead of aiming at 'total comprehension' of a particular reading passage, use that passage as a vehicle for teaching the reading skills that the learner needs for reading other passages.

Check Your Progress 2

Write in your own words all the factors that you need to keep in mind while constructing exercises for teaching reading comprehension.

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11.4 TEACHING OBJECTIVES FOR READING

At the end of a reading programme we should expect our learners to be able to achieve the following objectives at their own level, e.g. a learner at the end of class-VI should be able to identify the main points and details of a passage suitable to his/her level and s/he can should be able to do the same for a difficult passage at the end of class IX.

1. read silently at varying speed depending on the purpose of reading.
2. adopt different reading strategies (diagram in 5.3) for different types of text.
3. recognise the organisation of a text
4. identify the main points of a text.
5. understand the relations between different parts of a text.
6. anticipate and predict what will come next in a text.
7. deduce the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items in a given context.
8. consult a dictionary to obtain the required information.
9. infer, analyse, interpret and evaluate the ideas in a text.
10. select and extract from a text information required for a specific purpose.
11. transcode information from verbal to diagrammatic form.
12. read extensively for pleasure.

In any given passage it is possible to fulfill a combination of objectives i.e. when you choose a reading passage you can set questions/exercises/activities which would fulfil a number of objectives stated in this list.

11.5 PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING PRODUCING OR USING READING COMPREHENSION EXERCISES

According the Francoise Grellet there are a number of considerations to be borne in mind when producing or using reading comprehension exercises/activities.

1. One should start with global understanding (understanding the text as a whole) and move towards detailed understanding rather than working the other way round. Similarly, when constructing/using 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 is important and essential because

- a) It is an efficient way of building the learner's confidence. If the activity is global enough, the learner will not feel completely lost. They will feel that at least they understand what the text is about and will later feel less diffident when tackling a new text.
- b) It will develop an awareness of the way texts are organised (e.g. stating the main aim 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) Reading is a constant process of guessing and what one brings to the text is often what one finds in it. From the beginning the learners should be taught to use what they know, to understand unknown elements, whether these are ideas or simple words and phrases. This is best achieved through a global approach to the text.

- It is important to use authentic texts whenever possible (at least when you are choosing an unseen passage for reading comprehension). Authenticity means that nothing of the original text is changed and also its presentation and layout are retained. e.g. a newspaper article should be presented as it first appeared in the paper.

Getting the learners accustomed to reading authentic texts from the very beginning as against a simplified or adapted text does not necessarily mean a much more difficult task on the learner's part. The difficulty of a reading exercise depends on the activities and the exercises rather than on the text itself. Therefore, one should grade them and not the text.

- Another important principle when devising comprehension exercises is that the activities should be flexible and varied. The exercises 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.
- Reading Comprehension should not be separated from the other skills. There are a few cases in real life when we do not talk or write about what we read. It is therefore important to link the different skills through the reading activities.

Check Your Progress 3

What are the various things that we must take care of in order to make a learner an independent, efficient reader?

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11.6 READING COMPREHENSION IN THE CLASSROOM

As you've already read in Course 3, Block 2 the first point to be noted when conducting a reading lesson in the classroom is that it is a silent activity. Therefore silent reading should be encouraged. The students should not read aloud. This would in fact tend to give the impression that all the 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 something. Such tactics became impossible when reading aloud and this reading activity therefore tends to prevent the learners from developing efficient reading strategies.

Three phases of a reading lesson :

Pre-reading tasks

- These tasks arouse learners' interest in the topic, encourage them to predict and deal with difficult vocabulary.

In order to help prepare for pre-reading work, useful questions that you can ask yourself are:

- What knowledge, ideas or opinions might the learners already have on the topic and how can this knowledge be drawn out and used?
- Why should anyone want to read this text and can the same or similar reasons be generated in the learners?

The answers to these questions will give a clue to ways of introducing the text, motivating the learners and at the same time will incorporate language preparations. Visuals, drawing up of lists or setting questions (mostly oral) may all play a part in pre-reading activities.

While reading activity

This phase draws on the text, rather than the learners' ideas previous to the reading activity. The aims of this phase are:

- a) to help understand of the writer's purpose
- b) to help understand of the organisation of the text.
- c) to clarify the text content.

The traditional 'Comprehension exercise' at the end of the text is a typical **while reading** activity. There are usually plenty of these kind of activities/exercises. What you need to do is to consider whether these exercises correspond and fulfil the teaching objectives of reading.

The sort of questions that you can ask yourself as a guide to the while reading activities are the following :

- a) what is the function of this text?
- b) How is the text organised? (narrative, descriptive, chronological, etc.)
- c) what content is to be extracted from the text?
- d) what may the learner infer or deduce?
- e) what reading style is suitable?
- f) what language may be learned from the text?

As a rule, while reading work should begin with a general or global understanding of the text, and then move to the smaller units such as paragraphs, sentences and words. The reason for this is that the larger units provide a context for understanding the smaller units — a paragraph or a sentence e.g. may help the reader to understand a word.

Post-Reading

The exercises/activities in this section do not directly refer to the text, but grow out of it.

The aims of **post-reading** exercises are:

- 1) to consolidate and reflect upon what has been read
- 2) to relate the text to the learner's own knowledge, interests or views.

These exercises should contribute, in a coherent manner, to the writing, speaking and listening skills.

You may get ideas for post-reading work by asking yourself the following questions:

- a) Do the learner know of a similar situation to that presented in the text?
- b) Does the text present a situation that invites completion?
- c) Does the text present views that might need to be counter balanced?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes' then there is an opportunity for post-reading activities.

This three phase approach is not to be carried out mechanically on every occasion. Sometimes you may wish to cut out the pre-reading stage and get the learners to work on the text directly. Sometimes post-reading work may not be required.

However, the advantage of this three phase approach is twofold:

- a) it respects and makes use of the learner's knowledge of language and of the world and uses this as a basis for involvement, motivation and progress.
- b) it leads to the integration of the skills in a coherent manner, so that the reading session is not isolated.

Here are some exercises/activities based on a lesson, called 'The Never-Never Bird'. Which phase of a reading lesson is it meant for — **pre, while or post reading?** Give reasons to justify your answer. You can do this without knowing the text.

1. Why does the author call the never-never bird 'a spirit of the sky'?
2. Why was it important for the never-never bird not to cry out even though she was so scared?
3. Imagine you can fly like a bird. What does it feel like to soar above people's heads, to fly over houses and trees? What will you do and where will you go? Write a story about the exciting flight you made.
4. Describe how the scientist carried out the experiment.
5. Why do we need to experiment ?
6. Discuss in groups of four what you know about the Atlantic Ocean.

11.7 LET US SUM UP

As you are aware, in Course 3, we tried to give you an understanding of the nature of the reading process and the characteristics of reading as a meaningful activity. In this course, while we have reiterated some of the points of the previous course, at the same time our primary aim is to help you understand the principles underlying producing and using reading comprehension exercises which will help you to conduct the reading activity in a meaningful way in the classroom.

11.8 SUGGESTED READING

Grellet, F. 1981. *Developing Reading Skills*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.