

Overview of Strategies for Developing Reading Skills



Using Reading Strategies

Language instructors are often frustrated by the fact that students do not automatically transfer the strategies they use when reading in their native language to reading in a language they are learning. Instead, they seem to think reading means starting at the beginning and going word by word, stopping to look up every unknown vocabulary item, until they reach the end. When they do this, students are relying exclusively on their linguistic knowledge, a bottom-up strategy. One of the most important functions of the language instructor, then, is to help students move past this idea and use top-down strategies as they do in their native language.

Effective language instructors show students how they can adjust their reading behavior to deal with a variety of situations, types of input, and reading purposes. They help students develop a set of reading strategies and match appropriate strategies to each reading situation.

Strategies that can help students read more quickly and effectively include

- Previewing: reviewing titles, section headings, and photo captions to get a sense of the structure and content of a reading selection
- Predicting: using knowledge of the subject matter to make predictions about content and vocabulary and check comprehension; using knowledge of the text type and purpose to make predictions about discourse structure; using knowledge about the author to make predictions about writing style, vocabulary, and content
- Skimming and scanning: using a quick survey of the text to get the main idea, identify text structure, confirm or question predictions
- Guessing from context: using prior knowledge of the subject and the ideas in the text as clues to the meanings of unknown words, instead of stopping to look them up
- Paraphrasing: stopping at the end of a section to check comprehension by restating the information and ideas in the text

Instructors can help students learn when and how to use reading strategies in several ways.

- By modeling the strategies aloud, talking through the processes of previewing, predicting, skimming and scanning, and paraphrasing. This shows students how the strategies work and how much they can know about a text before they begin to read word by word.
- By allowing time in class for group and individual previewing and predicting activities as preparation for in-class or out-of-class reading. Allocating class time to these activities indicates their importance and value.

- By using cloze (fill in the blank) exercises to review vocabulary items. This helps students learn to guess meaning from context.
- By encouraging students to talk about what strategies they think will help them approach a reading assignment, and then talking after reading about what strategies they actually used. This helps students develop flexibility in their choice of strategies.

When language learners use reading strategies, they find that they can control the reading experience, and they gain confidence in their ability to read the language.

Reading to Learn

Reading is an essential part of language instruction at every level because it supports learning in multiple ways.

- Reading to learn the language: Reading material is language input. By giving students a variety of materials to read, instructors provide multiple opportunities for students to absorb vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and discourse structure as they occur in authentic contexts. Students thus gain a more complete picture of the ways in which the elements of the language work together to convey meaning.
- Reading for content information: Students' purpose for reading in their native language is often to obtain information about a subject they are studying, and this purpose can be useful in the language learning classroom as well. Reading for content information in the language classroom gives students both authentic reading material and an authentic purpose for reading.
- Reading for cultural knowledge and awareness: Reading everyday materials that are designed for native speakers can give students insight into the lifestyles and worldviews of the people whose language they are studying. When students have access to newspapers, magazines, and Web sites, they are exposed to culture in all its variety, and monolithic cultural stereotypes begin to break down.

When reading to learn, students need to follow four basic steps:

1. Figure out the purpose for reading. Activate background knowledge of the topic in order to predict or anticipate content and identify appropriate reading strategies.
2. Attend to the parts of the text that are relevant to the identified purpose and ignore the rest. This selectivity enables students to focus on specific items in the input and reduces the amount of information they have to hold in short-term memory.
3. Select strategies that are appropriate to the reading task and use them flexibly and interactively. Students' comprehension improves and their confidence increases when they use top-down and bottom-up skills simultaneously to construct meaning.
4. Check comprehension while reading and when the reading task is completed. Monitoring comprehension helps students detect inconsistencies and comprehension failures, helping them learn to use alternate strategies.

There are Many Types of Strategies – Use What Works

There are many strategies that may help you with your reading. It is helpful to learn strategies that will help you **before, during, and after** you read as well as those strategies that will help you recognize new words, understand vocabulary, and gain meaning from the text. According to reading experts, “good readers” do the following to improve their comprehension:

- Establish a purpose
- Preview the text
- Activate/use prior knowledge

- Make predictions
- Confirm, revise, or reject predictions
- Create mental images
- Identify organizational patterns
- Determine the most important ideas and themes
- Ask questions
- Clarify understanding
- Connect text to self, world, and other texts
- Draw inferences
- Summarize and synthesize
- Monitor comprehension
- Use fix-up strategies for difficult words/phrases
- Share responses

Unfortunately, not every student enjoys reading. This may be for a variety of reasons: the reading is difficult, the material isn't interesting, it takes too much time or other more specific reasons unique to each student. However, since reading is used widely, both in school and outside of school, it is important to learn to read as well as possible. This occurs with practice. Look for reading topics that interest you. Choose reading materials that interest you: magazines, Internet sites, comic books, newspapers, etc. and use those materials to spark your enjoyment. Bottom line: even if you don't like to read, practice the skills that will help you to become the best reader possible.

Before Reading the Text (Pre-reading)

- Establish a purpose
- Preview or survey the text
- Use prior knowledge
- Make predictions
- Identify new vocabulary

During Reading

- Confirm revise or reject predictions
- Create mental images
- Ask questions
- Clarify understanding
- Connect text to self, world and other texts
- Draw inferences

After Reading

- Summarize and synthesize
- Respond to text
- Answer questions
- Connect text to self, world and other texts

SQ3R is a commonly known and used strategy for teaching comprehension of reading material. The acronym stands for Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review. Students are encouraged to begin reading by **surveying** the contents (looking over the material), **questioning** to enhance

understanding, **reading** with purpose, **reciting** in search of answers, and **reviewing** with the intent to remember. This is an effective strategy to learn and apply as text becomes more difficult, particularly for textbooks at the secondary level.