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# Teaching Reading Comprehension in English Through Vocabulary: A Demonstration of Some Strategies

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## Introduction

The effective teaching of reading comprehension to children requires the development of certain skills (viz., perceptive, cognitive and linguistic skills). These skills can be focused on severally during teaching or, otherwise, they can be integrated. Current thinking in teaching reading comprehension, however, would seem to favour the latter, in view of the maximum input benefit which pupils can derive from it.

The symbiotic relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary development has been long recognized (Personke, 1982; Dudley, 1986; Abe, 1987). While words are regarded as tools for comprehending texts, it is equally clear that reading (with comprehension) also assists in developing one's vocabulary (Day & Bamford, 1998; Huckin, Haynes & Coady, 1993). Krashen (1989) says:

Although we suspect that there is still a valuable role for some explicit vocabulary-building activities, we believe it is reasonable to assume that a great deal of vocabulary, like syntax and morphology, can be acquired through 'comprehensible input,' especially when the oral input is augmented by reading (p. 28).

In this paper we shall discuss some methods of teaching reading comprehension to Senior Secondary School pupils through the process of learning and mastering of English words. The demonstration is expected to:

- i. make classroom teachers aware of some effective methods of teaching reading comprehension.
- ii. suggest to teachers some effective methods of helping pupils develop their vocabulary through reading.

Although the above objectives form the focus, the discussion of them takes place within the wider framework of "integrated language teaching" (Howe & Tomori, 1980).

## **Developing Pupils' Reading Comprehension Skills in English**

Two major concepts are central to our discussion in this study. First is that of integrated language teaching or whole language approach. This approach (Goodman & Goodman, 1981; Onukogu & Arua, 1997) emphasizes two major procedures which apply to this study. First is the integration of skills procedure which decries the atomistic presentation of language skills in the classroom. In presenting reading comprehension in this paper, relevant aspects of the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are stimulated towards a whole learning process.

The second concept is that of the interactive processing model (Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1988; Paran, 1997) applies to this study in three respects. First, it ensures that the learner interacts with a text not only by recognizing words and decoding its content but also by constructing the meaning, (i.e., predicting, confirming, evaluating and creating messages out of the text content). By doing this, both the "top-down" and "bottom-up" procedures are utilized to integrate the higher and lower levels of processing comprehension. Second, it ensures learner, teacher and learner-learner interaction in the classroom, in preference to the teacher-centered or learner-centered presentation. It is especially very important that learners interact in pairs and in groups when lessons take place in large classes (Coleman, 1987). Lastly the interactive processing model ensures that pupils are encouraged to relate the interpretation of text to the culture and environment in which reading takes place.

Undoubtedly, the teacher provides an anchor for the comprehension lesson, but the learners should be constantly busy as the teacher sets various tasks for them with little intervention from him/her.

### **Some Methods of Teaching Reading Comprehension Through Vocabulary**

Several methods have been utilized over the years for teaching and testing reading comprehension in the classroom. These include the traditional intensive reading-question-answer methods and gap-filling methods such as the cloze test and c-test. In more recent times, several other methods deriving from insights into language studies have been introduced for teaching effectiveness. Such include, especially, the prediction, spider-graph, story-telling and retelling, and creative activity methods which we have found useful in the classroom. Our presentation later in this study is a demonstration of how these methods might be utilized in the classroom.

To put it briefly, the prediction method enhances the teaching of reading comprehension by ensuring that learners process texts through interactive guessing and making

of hypotheses. Research in schema theory says efficient reading is an interactive process involving the activation of prior knowledge both before and during decoding.

The spider-graph method is a test of word association in vocabulary development (Meara, 1983; Nation, 1991). Rather than test individual words, the method connects words together into an association network based on semantic relationships (synonyms, antonyms, collocations, etc.) among them. In teaching reading comprehension, an establishment of relationship among key words in a text is one way by which learners can interact meaningfully with the text.

The method of retelling stories has been known to help in comprehension. Glazer (1993) opines that as learners retell the story they have read or listened to, the teacher can determine how well they understand texts. In retelling stories, pupils have the opportunity to share their experiences with others while they strive to remember what they have read or heard. Jegede (1997), in her discussion of text comprehension, presents different guidelines and procedures for encouraging pupils to retell stories.

Lastly, various forms of creative activities can take place during or after reading comprehension. Pictures can be drawn to represent events or characters in a text. A short piece of drama can be composed from a story and this can be acted out in class or during a period for social or literacy activities. In addition, the key words of a text may provide the topic for new stories to be told or written. The integration of creative activities into the reading comprehension lesson seems to provide the greatest avenue for demonstration of integrative teaching.

### **The Reading Material and Classroom Setting**

The material for the comprehension lessons presented in this study consists of four short stories, A, B, C and D (See Appendix) provided by Price (1997, p. 38). The four passages located here are found appropriate for two one-hour lessons of reading comprehension for forty senior Secondary School 1 pupils in Nigeria.

The pupils generally have had six years of primary education and are in their fourth year in the secondary school. Although the pupils have been exposed to English lessons right from their first day in primary school and also learnt other subjects through the medium of English from the upper primary class, their level of mastery of the language cannot be judged higher than that of lower primary school native-English children. Nonetheless, the learners have had enough exposure in the language to enable them to participate in a reading lesson, if well-motivated.

The teacher (this writer) is a participant in an extramural evening coaching class organized by some university teachers for their children (the learners) to augment the normal school lessons of the children. When it became clear at one point that the

schools were not doing enough to educate children and that the standards of education were falling, parents resorted to sending their children to organized evening coaching classes, while some who could afford it, employed teachers to specially coach their children at home.

The classroom is spacious enough to accommodate forty or more pupils. Even though the seats and tables are fixed, there is enough space to allow improvisations of seating arrangements for group work. However, the greatest challenge before the teacher is the need to constantly search for materials and also improvise them. As it were, apart from the recommended class text, pupils have no other text that is common. When pupils find reading materials in the class text boring, varied materials from other sources stimulate them and thus make the lessons more exciting.

### **Presentation of Reading Comprehension Lessons**

#### **Lesson 1 (60 mins.)**

##### Prediction (10 mins.)

The teacher greets the class and introduces the topic of the lesson. The classroom interaction continues thus:

Teacher: Pupils, I read a number of related stories from a book yesterday. The title of the book is "Street Wise". (Teacher writes title on the board). I want you all to guess what the content of the stories could be. What words or objects and activities can you likely connect with "street"?

Pupils: (Following bids and nominations with some occasional prompting): Houses, road, people, animals, traffic, vehicles, bicycle, shops trees, driving, walking, riding, noise .....

Teacher: What about "wise"?

Pupils: Careful, careless, sensible, warning, rules, following regulations, etc.

Teacher: How can we be wise in the street?

Pupils: Avoid accident, beware of thieves, be cautious of strangers, make new friends, be businesslike, observe traffic regulations, avoid sluggishness, walk/drive carefully, don't be drunk....

Teacher: Now, let us read some of the stories in the book on "Street Wise" to find out.

##### Story-reading: Sharing and Retelling (50 mins.)

The forty pupils are divided into eight groups of five pupils each. The stories A, B, C and D are shared among the groups, so that two different groups have a similar story

to look at in their respective discussions. A story is read and discussed in each group following two instructions:

1. Each group should point out the mistakes that the tourists made in each situation.
2. The group should give advice to the tourists to avoid the mistakes above.

The whole class now comes together as a representative of each group retells her group story to the class. Four groups retell their stories; the other group representatives only supply missing links to the stories they share with the previous groups. The groups come up with the following “edited” responses to the instructions given to them.

Text A:

The girlfriend did not take good care of her bag. She should have held the bag more tightly in her arms. She should beware of thieves in the street. She should report the incident to the police.

Text B:

The tourist unwittingly showed the location of her wallet to the thief. She was credulous. The tourist should keep her wallet securely next time. She should be more critical of other people’s comments.

Text C:

The tourist was gullible to have totally trusted a stranger. The tourist was sedated through the coffee he/she drank. She/he should not have taken a drink from a stranger. She/he should report the stranger and describe him to the police.

Text D:

The tourists were taken in by the good dressing of the locals. They were also not cautious enough in the information they gave to strangers. Tourists should not judge people’s behaviour by their dressing. They must also watch their speech.

After the classroom discussion, pupils go back to their groups where they exchange stories with other groups. At the end of the lesson each group is expected to have read three or four of the stories.

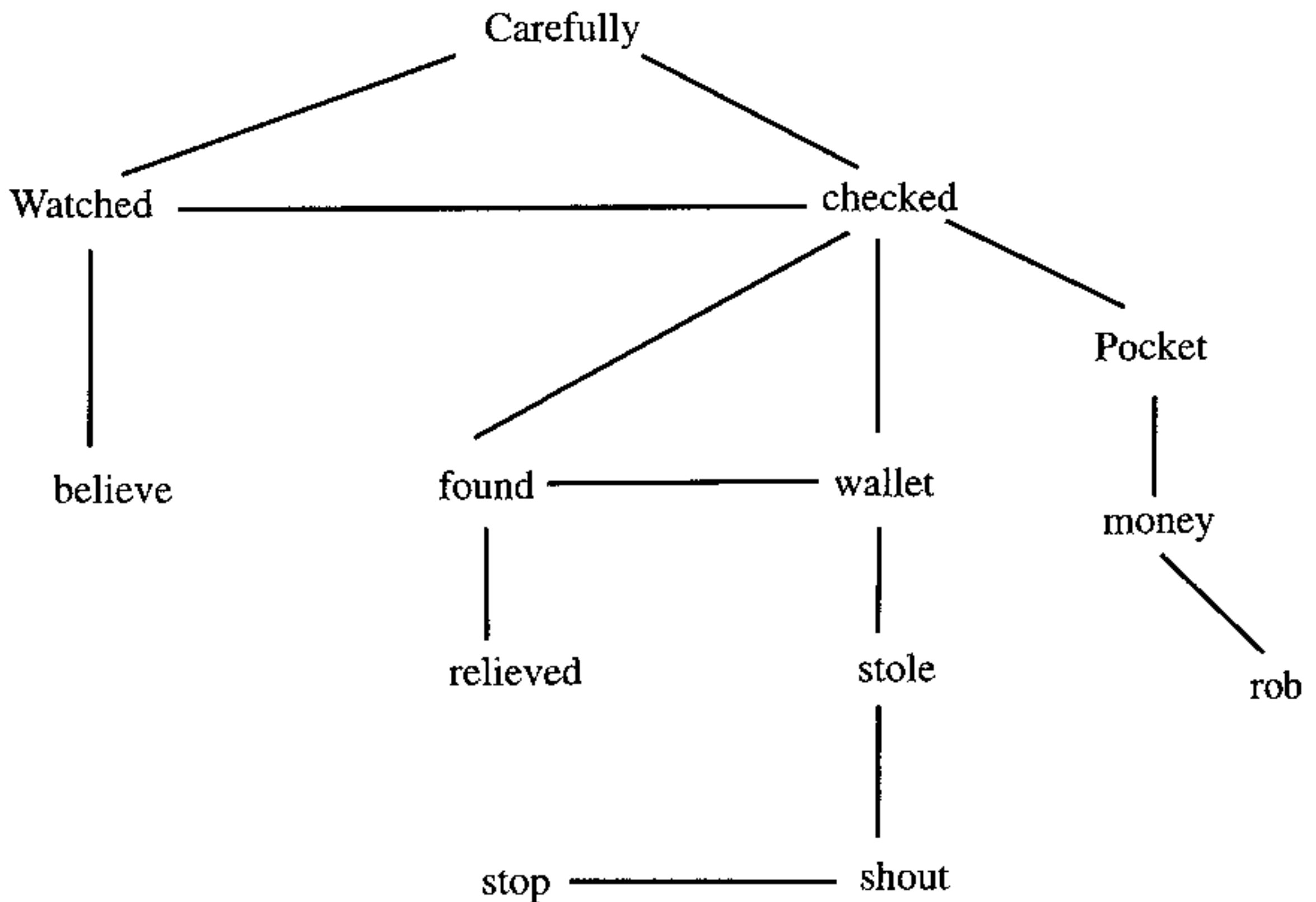
## **Lesson 2 (60 mins.)**

### **Spider-graph (15 mins.)**

The pupils are told that a text is made up of words which are connected in a related field for meaning. A knowledge of the relationship between words in a text enhances

coherence and makes the text more understandable to the reader. Pupils are asked to pick one of the stories. Then working in pairs, they should try to relate as many key words in the text together.

The following graph prepared by a pair of pupils on messages has the greatest density of words.



### Creative Activity (45 mins.)

Following the teacher's instruction, the pupils voluntarily divided into three interest groups to engage themselves in different creative activities. Each group was told to pick some (four or five) key words from any of the texts being studied and create a story, drama sketch, or draw a picture.

The picture group presented, in five minutes, a drawing which contained a motor cycle, the rider, a female passenger sitting on the ground holding a damaged shoe in her hand, and two other people standing by her. The presenter claimed in his explanation of the scene that the heel of the passengers shoe had mistakenly slipped into the spoke of the motorcycle and the spoke had twisted the shoe out of her leg. The passenger's shout had caused the rider to stop and drawn the attention of some passers-by. The shoe had been badly damaged, while the passenger, luckily, had a minor sprain of her ankle. The presenter explained that objects in the picture were drawn separately by different members of the group and later pasted to create a scene earlier agreed upon by members.

The drama group, in ten minutes, presented a play in which a sensuous man was robbed by a lady. The man had met the beautiful lady at a restaurant where he had stopped over for relaxation after work. After a friendly exchange, the lady agreed to follow him home; she offered to prepare a meal which he joyfully ate. After a seemingly exciting meal, he fell asleep. Six hours later, he woke up and found that his purse and wrist watch were missing.

### Homework

After the presentations, the teacher gave the pupils an essay assignment to write from home—the topic was: “The Day I Lost My Pocket Money to Thieves On My Way to School.”

## Conclusion

This paper has presented some strategies whereby the vocabulary is used as a resource for reading comprehension in English. Utilizing the principles of integrative language teaching and interactive processing, the study demonstrates the teaching of reading comprehension through the methods of predicting, spider graph, story-retelling and creative activity. In particular, the study has been stimulated by the location and use of short, interesting, and sensible texts collected from a journal.

The active participation of pupils and their creative output during the lesson encourage the teacher and testify that effective teaching has taken place. The recipe has, of course, been (i) suitable reading materials, (ii) an experienced teacher, and (iii) appropriate teaching methods.

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### About the Author

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## Appendix

**A** The ocean looked fantastic and the locals and tourists were enjoying themselves, walking up and down the road next to the beach. People were cycling or riding small motorcycles along the beach road. My girlfriend was carrying her bag over her shoulder. I heard the noise of a motorcycle engine close behind us. Suddenly, my girlfriend started shouting and I saw the motorcycle speeding off up the street. A passenger on the bike was holding a knife, and my girlfriend's bag.

**B** We were walking along in the city centre enjoying the sights. I kept my wallet in my inside jacket pocket. Suddenly a man ran up to us. He was shouting, "Sir, Madam ... stop! You've been robbed!" Of course, I immediately put my hand inside my jacket to check my wallet. I was relieved to find that it was still there and so was my money. Back at the hotel, I couldn't believe it when I found that my wallet was gone! The helpful man had watched me very carefully. He saw exactly where I kept my wallet when I checked my jacket pocket. Later he stole my money.

**C** I was walking down to the beach when a stranger came up to me and tried to shake my hand. "Don't you remember me, my friend?" he said. I didn't recognise his face at all. "I saw you at the airport the other day. I work there at passport control. How are you enjoying our beautiful country?" I couldn't remember him but I was too embarrassed to tell him. He was so friendly. He even offered to take me to his uncle's seafood restaurant. We went there for dinner. The seafood was great but the coffee did taste a little strange! Six hours later, I woke up. My money was gone and I didn't know where I was. My friend had even taken my watch and shoes!

**D** We were in a bar when two well-dressed locals introduced themselves. When I told them that I was from London they were really excited. "You are from London? What a coincidence! My sister is going to London next week, to be a nurse in a big hospital. But she is worried about travelling to a strange country. Could you come back to my house and talk to her? She would be so grateful and my house is close to here!" They were so polite that it seemed rude for us to refuse. We left the bar and started walking to the house. Ten minutes later one of our new 'friends' pulled a knife out of his pocket. "Give us all your money!" he said. We never met his sister.