

# A DIRECTED READING APPROACH

by Jeffrey Butler

**Reading teacher.** Are those words mutually exclusive, like painless dentistry or lowered taxes? Can reading, a private, non-observable, largely unconscious act be taught by print proctors who know little about electro-chemical brain processes, and even less about what constitutes a human thought? Or are symbol-message interconnections best facilitated by reading coaches who prepare their charges with reading drills before sending them out to learn inductively by facing the dreaded print jabberwock one-on-one? Teachers or coaches, which are we?

I hope the answer is that we are teachers, those who systematically approach reading instruction with intellectual skill and a humane sense of experimental artistry. No doubt, like coaches, we provide drills and motivate our mental athletes with pavlovian aplomb through scores and grades. But if drilling and rewarding are most of what we do, then we might as well be replaced by reading machines customized with programmed reinforcement messages which say, "Your intelligence excites my circuits," or "Even as a machine that answer offends me."

It is my contention that reading teachers, of a second language or otherwise, will find their jobs supplemented rather than supplanted by machines only as long as they understand some realities about reading and have a systematic teaching approach which integrates these realities into practice. What follows is a brief discussion of both.

**Reality 1.** Reading is only one part of a larger languaging process. Listening, speaking and writing are also parts of languaging and, along with reading, interact with and reinforce one another. This means that talking, listening, and writing about reading techniques and materials help a student become a skillful reader, and are justifiable learning activities in a TESL reading classroom. Conversely, if these other languaging processes are not used to supplement print person one-on-oneness, reading skill development will not be facilitated.

**Reality 2.** Reading in any language is a process of recording, decoding, and encoding information which leads to comprehension.

Recording suggests that a student needs to develop sensitivity to key informational elements within a printed piece and a method for retaining that information.

Decoding means that a reader must convert the information he has gleaned from a written text into a set of ideas which he comprehends. Vocabulary and contextual comprehension must be symbiotic to one another for decoding to occur. A reading teacher does not have a choice of which of these skills to teach. They are interrelated and must be taught together.

Encoding is reorganizing information into prioritized arrangements. The success of this reorganization, or synthesis, can be estimated through post reading discussions and tests. In fact, discussions and tests will frequently crystallize encoded concepts by verifying student assumptions about idea relationships and conclusions to be drawn from them.

**Reality 3.** While reading skills are transferrable from content to content, comprehension may not be. That is, in spite of using similar reading strategies in two or more subject areas, the reader cannot expect to comprehend all of the material equally well. To a TESL reading teacher who is preparing his students to matriculate in an English speaking institution, this principle is important. It suggests that a reading program should emphasize core concepts, scientific approaches, and the specialized jargon of the several general education disciplines to which the student will be exposed. Without this focused preparation, even a moderately successful ESL reading student may not be able to effectively assimilate general education subject material.

**Reality 4.** Teacher-student interfacing is essential at several stages in the reading instruction process. Perhaps one reason why reading teachers are surviving the development of intelligently programmed reading

machines is that learners frequently need feedback for which there are no programs. This dialogic function is probably the most important pedagogical resource a teacher brings with him to the teaching of reading. Traditionally, much of this mental interaction occurs during post reading discussions and tests. The teaching approach which follows explains how and why teacher-student dialogue is necessary at other reading process stages as well.

**The Directed Reading Approach.** The teaching technique which follows is called a Directed Reading Approach, or DRA. The words in this title bear brief discussion because they represent not so much a label as a description of one method for extending and refining reading skills.

Directed Reading Approaches range along a continuum from high-moderate-low teacher involvement. The pedagogical decision determining the amount of structure is a function of student skill or readiness tempered by teaching style. ESL students, because they often deal with unfamiliar vocabulary items, strange rhetorical patterns, and new learning concepts, require greater structure at the early stages of their academic careers than later when their reading repertoires are more sophisticated.

Writing teachers generally acknowledge writing to be the product of a three-part process, the stages of which are commonly labeled prewriting, writing, and post writing. Reading, the introverted consumer of writing's extroverted productivity, is also a process with which teacher and student can interact at three stages: prereading, reading, and post reading. This is not to suggest that reading itself is composed only of three stages. There is considerable academic research and debate over what constitutes the thought processes which comprise reading. The phases labeled here, however, do represent teaching stages during which an instructor can perform his dialogic function.

"Approach" implies the wide spectrum of teaching styles and techniques which can be brought to a reading lesson. It represents the openended creativity with which a teacher complements the written text. A

description of some approaches used within the framework of a Directed Reading Approach follows.

Far too often reading tests are guessing games. Students read slowly for these tests, hanging on every word or idea because they do not know what the questions will be. In the Directed Reading Approach, however, students are primed and focused during the prereading phase. The teacher often begins the lesson by listing vocabulary with which students may have difficulty. These words can be introduced individually through prefix-root-suffix analysis, synonym identification, spelling makeup, or through any other word isolation technique designed to meet the lesson objectives. It is not uncommon for an instructor to ask students to group these words according to categories they determine themselves, and then use these categories for a prereading discussion

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of potential concepts to be found in the reading. Frequently, the title of the reading selection is discussed in relation to the vocabulary items and categories in this early stage of developing reader readiness.

The prereading stage offers the opportunity to present the reader with content questions for his consideration while he reads. Searching for the answers to these questions will give the reader a preconceived focus for reading. It should not be supposed that, armed with questions which indicate the teacher's priorities, a student will merely skim or scan material looking only for the answers. He may quickly find factual material, but interpretational questions requiring analysis, syntheses, and evaluation will not be so obvious. Giving the reader these questions in advance, however, will reduce ineffectual exploration and speed up

prioritized induction of key concepts.

One key to understanding content, particularly in a narrative reading or one with chronological ordering, is a time line written by the student. Along this line he marks the sequential occurrence of events in the reading. The simple act of organizing events along a time continuum reinforces student understanding of order and, when completed, gives him a ready made form for overall review of his material. Similar techniques can be adapted for idea or structural analysis of other holistic rhetorical forms and internal organizational patterns.

As a concluding step in prereading, a student should be directed toward reading process objectives, methods of attacking the reading material. Aside from requesting that the student overview, or skim, supplemental markers, subheads, captions, pictures, illustrations, graphs, etc., before he reads, the teacher should suggest the type of reading to be done and a timed rate to be met. Types of reading range from scanning, or rapid identification of predetermined facts, to study reading where a majority of the ideas in a selection are read or considered carefully. It should be noted that to become efficient readers, students do not need to read every word in a selection. Further, they should be able to adapt their reading techniques and rate to the material and the purpose, reading more or less and faster or slower according to their needs. These two points, though obvious to seasoned readers, are frequently overlooked by grade conscious students generally, and more frequently overlooked by linguistically naive second language readers.

The second, or reading stage, of a Directed Reading Approach will clearly have been somewhat determined by careful prereading preparation. Guided by questions, supplemented by vocabulary comprehension, and regimented by reading technique, the student can frequently negotiate the reading material by himself. Although the teacher's silence during the reading phase may suggest that he is not a participant, he nevertheless is a key contributor to content comprehension because he has set the agenda. Occasionally a teacher may orally read a part or all of a selection. Oral reading, though traditionally frowned upon in a college setting, is particularly important for

ESL students. By hearing and seeing words simultaneously, they learn inflection, pronunciation, word recognition, and contextual understanding, all of which are essential to second language acquisition. In more advanced ESL classes, where students have greater than hesitant control over the language, they may occasionally read to one another.

Post reading is a time for debriefing. The reading teacher should probe his students to see the extent of their understanding. Not only should he ask students to share the answers to prereading questions, frequently requiring them to show evidence within the text for their conclusions, but he should ask other questions as well. These additional questions should expand upon the original questions requiring the reader to flesh out concepts stated by or implied within the text. Frequently, these questions should require the readers to manipulate the newly acquired ideas by evaluating them against circumstances or concepts beyond those in the reading. These demonstrations of mental agility will help reinforce the material and prepare the reader for more sophisticated concepts to be encountered in subsequent readings.

ESL readers should again review the vocabulary presented earlier in the prereading step during the post reading. This discussion should reinforce original definitions in light of their contextual settings. One advantage of contextual vocabulary review is to identify frequent connotative shifts in word interpretation caused by the larger sentence-paragraph-page structures in which these words sit. Another advantage of further vocabulary consideration is to allow students to identify additional unfamiliar words which the instructor may have overlooked while previewing the material.

Finally, a post reading debriefing should discuss the process of reading. The teacher should find out how well students met predetermined reading technique and rate goals. If the word register or concept level was too sophisticated for the students, reading will have been an unsettling and painful experience. A reading teacher needs to know how his material was received so

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that he can intelligently decide which selection to present next. In the most extreme cases, he may be required to give students extensive practice in word attack and word meaning skills before they again read material of commensurate sophistication. In other cases, the textbooks may have to be reselected to meet both the content and reading readiness levels of the students. Texts do not facilitate learning, regardless of their content relevancy, if they cannot be read.

It is hoped that by applying a Directed Reading Approach to the teaching of reading, an ESL reading teacher will have a workable tool. With it he should move students toward becoming autonomous readers. Recognizing that using this approach will require him to be intimately familiar with his assigned material and individual student's abilities, the reading teacher should also realize that his systematized efforts must also be patterned according to predetermined learning objectives. Applying the Structured Reading Approach sensitively and consistently, the ESL instructor will become a part of the reading process. He will become a reading teacher.