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TEACHING TIPS FORUM

Don't Just Ask Your Students To Read But Act

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How to make a reading class more entertaining.

Reading used to be viewed as a passive skill involving merely the decoding of the message written by writers unknown to the reader. Only recently has reading been considered an activity requiring interaction between the reader and the writer, and between the reader and the text. Reading involves not only bottom-up processing but top-down processing of the material whereby prior knowledge plays a large part in the reading process. In most reading classes, the teacher usually pre-teaches some vocabulary and linguistic structures that might pose problems for students, as well as asks some personalized questions that are related to the context. After the reading stage, students will be asked to do typical comprehension questions such as answering true/false questions, giving short answers to specific questions, matching answers or filling in the blanks. This type of exercise is fairly predictable for the students and does not necessarily demand higher-order thinking skills. This is why many students express some sort of dissatisfaction and even boredom while engaging in reading

activities, especially when a long text is involved.

In one of my classes in which I taught graduate students from mixed disciplines, I found that having my students learn to read by doing or acting was very effective in teaching reading. This not only promotes students' understanding of a text but creates a relaxed, cooperative learning atmosphere in which students can learn from each other.

About the Class

This class consisted of graduate students from various disciplines who registered for the "Skills in English for Graduates" course, an elective general English course emphasizing the skills of reading and writing. Their English proficiency levels ranged from intermediate to high intermediate. Most of them showed fairly high motivation in learning English.

Materials and Procedures

In a lesson which focuses on skimming, scanning and reading for the main idea, the students are asked to read a passage on advertising, divided into five paragraphs. The first paragraph introduces why advertising is important in a competitive

business world. The next three paragraphs describe three strategies commonly used by advertisers, and the last paragraph is the conclusion.

The following steps were taken in handling the text:

Step 1 (15 minutes) To familiarize students with the topic, I asked them about their favorite ads and why they liked them. Then I asked them to discuss the role of advertising in the business world and how advertising influenced their buying decisions. This activity, which pertained to students' personal experiences, generated a lot of discussion, and was effective in getting students involved in the topic they were about to read. As the questions asked were personalized, each of these students could find something to say and share with their classmates.

Step 2 (15 minutes) Students read the first paragraph and tried to answer the questions as to how advertising helped manufacturers increase sales. I led the discussion afterwards. Note that it would be very helpful at this stage if the teacher asked thought-provoking questions, encouraging students to think critically and enabling them to draw on their schemata.

Step 3 (20 minutes) I divided students into three groups, with each group reading a different paragraph describing an advertising strategy. After they read and understood the content, they had to select a fictitious product or service they wanted to advertise, and then apply the strategy to promote the product/service.

This activity engaged students in exchanging ideas. I noticed that students spent quite a few minutes before they agreed

upon the advertised item. After that they had to write a script for the presenters who would later rehearse their part. Throughout the activity, group participants would propose ideas and provide comments. A lot of negotiation was going on at this stage.

Step 4 (15 minutes) Time to act! Presenters for each ad were asked to demonstrate in front of the class, after which a group member would summarize the strategy adopted. (A variation to this was to ask the other groups to guess what strategy was being employed.)

Step 5 (10 minutes) Three student referees who were supposed to be neutral had to choose the best ad, and be ready to provide reasons for their choice.

Step 6 (5 minutes) I rounded up the session by giving some comments as well as summarizing the points being illustrated.

All these steps are represented in Table 1 (see Appendix)

Concluding remarks

The kind of activity I have tried out in my reading class obviously yields certain benefits. First of all, it serves as a tool to check students' comprehension of the text. As already mentioned, students are requested to summarize each advertising strategy after they have acted it out. Therefore, before they can plan the activity, it is important for them to understand the message. It is also a student-generated activity which promotes collaboration, interaction and negotiation. Group work is encouraged as it helps reduce students' anxiety. I have found that most Thai students prefer doing group activities to individual work. They would try their best

to contribute to the group. Those who are too shy to act out in front of the class volunteered to write and prepare the script or do the summarization instead. This kind of activity also enhances critical thinking as the students must attempt to connect the content to their personal experiences, apply their knowledge to new situations, and comment on others' opinions or performances. Although it is a reading lesson, the tasks involve skills integration, giving students opportunities to participate in oral discussions, creative writing and listening simultaneously. By actively engaging in activities, students can gradually internalize the information, leading to better retention of the content and a deepening of their understanding of the text. They also have to make decisions at every stage and are made

responsible for their own learning. Most of all, some students may find acting very appealing, especially those learners who prefer kinesthetic styles of learning (cf. Altan, 2001; Christison, 1998).

As students do not learn in the same way, the challenge for the teacher is to find varieties of reading tasks or activities that suit the diverse learning styles of students. The activities I have proposed would be attractive not only to kinesthetic learners but also to those who favor visual, logical and interpersonal styles of learning. I believe these activities, though time-consuming, are worthwhile. My students appeared to have fun throughout the lesson, especially when seeing their peers perform, and of course, *fun activities allow learning to take place easily.*

References

Altan, M. (2001). The theory of multiple intelligences: What does it offer EFL teachers? Modern English Teacher, 10(1), 52-56.

Christison, M. A. (1998). An introduction to multiple intelligence theory and second language learning. In J. Reid (Ed.), Understanding learning styles in the second language classroom (pp. 1-14). Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall Regents.

Appendix

Table 1

Step	Activity	Purpose
1	Students talk about their favorite ads and discuss the role of advertising.	To contextualize the topic
2	Students read the first paragraph and discuss.	To encourage students to participate in discussion
3.	Students read the paragraph assigned and plan the script that demonstrates the content of the text.	To engage students in idea sharing and have them practise writing
4.	Students act out, following the prepared script.	To get students involved in speaking and listening
5.	Student judges choose the best performance.	To get students involved in decision-making
6.	Teacher provides comments.	To provide clarification

Summary

If you or your students get tired of a reading lesson, you might like to try this. Instead of simply giving typical comprehension questions, the teacher may ask students to read analytically and translate the ideas in the text into acting. This type of activity promotes cooperative learning, and is responsive to different learner styles.