INTERACTIVE READING USING AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN AN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This paper discusses the practical strategies of how to teach reading skills communicatively using authentic materials in an English as a foreign language context. Reading is approached as an interactive process between the readers' mind and the text. It is not merely a receptive activity but it is a process whereby readers create imaginations and anticipate ideas which might come up from the linguistic forms of the text. Throughout the reading process, readers construct ideas by synergizing the ideas of their minds and the signs conveyed by the text. Hence, comprehension is more efficient. In order to comply with such a process, learners are facilitated maximally through the activation of their background knowledge and the provision of linguistic and conceptual hints which are conducted by teachers in a pre-reading phase. To develop the linguistic skill and affirm the comprehension, furthermore, the ideas that have been constructed throughout the whilst-reading step are, then, used as materials to conduct the post reading activities.

Key words: *interactive reading approach, authentic materials, three-phase techniques*

In the context of English as a foreign language, learners in their real life activities, generally speaking, do not read English texts as frequently as they listen to English sounds. They often listen to English songs. When they watch TV movies, they also listen to English talks. However, they intensively read English texts, books, magazines, newspapers, journals, and other English text types usually only as a part of academic assignments; for instance, if they are instructed by their teachers to do so. Despite the fact, nevertheless, as one of the language skills, reading ability plays a vital role especially for the future professional or academic career.

There are several purposes that can be accomplished in teaching reading, such as improving reading skills, introducing new language, introducing genre, recycling target language, assessing learners' ability, and providing knowledge of the world. The main aim of teaching reading is, basically, to improve learners' reading skills, i.e. reading for

gist (general ideas) and reading for specific information. These are represented by the tasks and activities done by the learners during the teaching and learning process of reading. In teaching reading, teachers can introduce new target language including lexical, grammatical, functional, and rhetorical aspects of the language. Reading activities can also be used to introduce genre. That is done by using varied text types as reading materials.

In the teaching and learning process of reading, learners recycle vocabulary, grammar, and knowledge of discourse markers. The lexical, grammatical, and discourse features that have been known are reinforced and practiced, hence becoming more understood and acquired. By monitoring learners' involvement in reading activities, teachers are also able to assess learners' current perceptive ability of the target language. In addition, by reading English texts, learners can improve their knowledge about the world and add experiences. This is especially true when the texts are authentic materials, taken from the real world, such as news, articles, scientific papers, and research reports, etc.

Reading is a receptive skill in the sense that readers perceive insights, messages, or meanings out of language forms. It does not necessarily mean, however, that perceiving is equal to passive action. It cannot be said to be passive at all because while reading, the minds of the readers are not passively stagnant and do nothing. In reading, the brain is actively processing the linguistic input in order to solve the puzzles of meaning making.

Reading is an interactive process between the text and the readers' mind (Carrell, Devine, and Eskey 1988). Before the reader is really involved in the activity of reading the text, his/her background knowledge has been activated, thus s/he has been

psychologically prepared with the anticipation of meanings. In the process of reading the text, the mind is going back and forth, creating meanings, checking whether the meanings go in line with the contents of the text, revising and creating new meanings, then rechecking them to the text, and so forth.

Reading Materials

There are two kinds of materials that can be used for teaching Reading: authentic materials and pedagogic materials (Tomlinson 1998). Authentic materials are those which are taken from real life communication and not designed for language teaching and learning purposes, for example: newspapers, magazines, shopping flyers, advertisements, brochures, product wrappings, menus, train schedules, e-mails, announcements, manuals, invitation cards, poems, short stories, novels, journals, reference books, etc.

Pedagogic materials are those which are designed for language teaching and learning purposes. Their main characteristics are topical and/or linguistic simplification, modification, and adjustments according to the level and experience of the target learners, such as: text books, students' work sheets, supplementary readers, abridged novels, graded materials, and teacher-made texts, etc.

Among the advantages of authentic materials are their naturalness and relevance with the learners' real life experiences, thus making them more interesting. The disadvantage is that they are usually too challenging, causing some difficulty to deal with, especially for learners of low level language ability. The pedagogic materials, on the other hand, although they are usually too rigidly modified, thus making them boring and non-lively, they are usually manageable and can easily be followed by the learners.

What the teachers should do is the use of variety of materials, both authentic and pedagogic, so that learners with their divergent learning styles and preferences are maximally accommodated by the benefits of diversity of materials. Another solution is that the teachers can create their own materials taking authentic forms but containing modified language and adjusted according to the level of the learners' ability.

Reading Strategies

There are four strategies in reading: skimming, scanning, extensive, and intensive (Spratt, Pulverness, and Williams 2005). Skimming is a reading strategy to find out the main idea, scanning is to find out a single fact, extensive reading is reading to gain knowledge or for pleasure, intensive reading is scrutinizing every word carefully. Different text types may require different reading strategies. The way to read an advertisement, for example, is different from the way to read a manual. While we just need to scan specific information in reading an advertisement, in reading a manual we should read intensively all procedural sentences in details so as not to mis-operate the equipment. While we just need to skim the headlines of morning newspaper, we need to read a novel extensively. By using a variety of text-type materials, it is possible for teachers to give learners alternatives to practice different sub-skills. In sum, the duty of teachers is to enlighten students on features of these genres and to help them develop strategies for extracting necessary meaning from each.

Most of real life reading is extensive. Extensive reading is defined as reading a large amount of materials of which purpose is to gain knowledge or pleasure, such as reading reference books, novels, journals, research reports, etc. The main focus is on

perceiving ideas irrespective of understanding all linguistic signs of the text (Renandya and Jacobs 2007).

Here lies the main difference between extensive and intensive readings. Extensive reading is aimed at attaining knowledge or pleasure putting aside all linguistic analyses, whereas intensive reading is intended to scrutinize the text thoroughly in detail. In reading intensively, all written symbols within the text must be understood, including that of words, referential expressions, punctuations, capitalizations, font features, and soon. All are viewed within textual framework. The reader, for instance, must understand what a pronoun "she" (in a paragraph) refers to, why the word "*queer*" is italicized, what is contrasted between paragraph one and two which starts with "however," and why the author closes the text by saying, "unless you are asleep," and so forth. Intensive reading is likely given by teachers to students in a Reading comprehension class in order to improve students' reading comprehension ability.

Procedures of Reading Lessons

There are various activities that can be done in a reading lesson. The basic principle is that the procedures should be logical in the sense that there are three phases: pre-, whilst- and post-reading activities (Harmer 2001). Pre-activities are activities conducted to prepare students before they are engaged in the reading activity. They are to energize them, to focus their attention to the topic, to activate their schemata, to introduce the topic, to generate students' interest in the topic, etc. The main purpose of this activity is to provide sufficient help to the students so that they are ready and able to do the following steps. This step may be manifested in terms of students' predicting the content of the text, teacher's showing pictures, asking students' experiences related to

the topic, talking about the title of the text, introducing and discussing difficult vocabulary that might be found in the text, etc.

The activities which are usually conducted in the pre-reading stage, among others, are:

1. Playing "Hangman"

2. Completing Spidergram

3. Anagram

4. Board race

5. Corner race

6. Change places

7. Guessing game: describing

8. Guessing game: yes/no questions

9. Chained words

10. Matching

11. Showing pictures

12. Predicting

13. Introducing difficult words

14. Listing vocabulary from jumbled letters

15. Telling a story, etc.

Doing pre-reading activities is basically intended to promote psychological preparedness of the learners and to facilitate them in doing the reading tasks. Some of them are fun activities and make learners move about. That is to energize them and to stimulate their enthusiasm in the learning process. Still, the activities should be kept

relevant with the topics of the texts to read although they may be manifested in terms of listening, speaking, or writing tasks.

Whilst-activities, furthermore, contain the main activity of reading. In this phase, students are really engaged in the reading process and do some tasks related to their comprehension of the text, such as understanding main ideas, finding specific information, and knowing the detailed messages contained in the texts. The main purpose of this stage is to improve students' reading sub-skills. This phase can be in the forms of students' answering comprehension questions, referential questions, evaluative questions, finding implied and explicit ideas, factual information, identifying the meanings of words in contexts, etc.

The tasks and/or activities which are normally done in the whilst-reading phase, among others, are:

1. Multiple Choice (MC)

2. True or false (T/F)

3. Completing

4. Answering

5. Making a diagram based on text

6. Predicting what the writer is to say next

7. Jigsaw reading

8. Making a sketch

9. Filling out a form

10. Ordering information

11. Ticking boxes or words in a list

12. Completing missing information in a table

13. Finding out which picture is being described

14. Matching (sentences, words, and/or pictures), etc.

Teaching reading is a matter of improving learners' communicative skills rather than just transferring knowledge about the contents of the texts. Therefore, the activities in this focal phase should be focused on meaning making processes and made in such a way so that learners authentically use the target language as if they deal with real life activities. To make the reading task authentic and communicative, for instance, learners must have purposes to read, which have been set by teachers.

Post-reading activities, moreover, are follow-up activities done after students are involved in the reading activity. This can be in the forms of discussing the topic of the text, summarizing, retelling, discussing the grammatical points, enriching vocabulary relevant with the topic, relating the topic with the students' life experiences, and their expressing opinions and comments about the topic. This stage is basically intended not only to reinforce and develop the linguistic knowledge, but also improve and practice other skills and components, such as speaking, writing, listening, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

The activities which are normally done in post-reading step, among others, are:

1. Summarizing

2. Discussing

3. Retelling

4. Mingling and interviewing

5. Discussing grammar

6. Enriching mastery of vocabulary

7. Working on pronunciation, etc.

Viewing the above three-phase techniques, we can summarize that pre-reading activities are basically intended to provide learners with sufficient help in order to facilitate them doing the reading tasks. Whilst-reading activities are the main tasks done by learners to improve their reading skills. Post-reading are follow-up activities to reinforce and develop learners' formal/explicit language knowledge. Those three phases are designed in such as to represent authentic real life language use behavior. In real life, reading must have a purpose; it aims at gaining knowledge or getting pleasure; and after reading, we usually exert our knowledge in interaction with our surroundings.

The following is an example of procedures of a reading lesson (adapted from Curriculum and Materials Developer Team 2007) which is logically ordered following the three-phase techniqes.

a) Using a picture to generate interest in the topic.

b) Using the title of the text to encourage learners to predict the content of the text.

c) Teaching essential vocabulary that learners may be unfamiliar with.

d) Asking learners to read the text quickly in order to answer gist questions.

e) Checking detailed understanding by asking multiple choice questions.

f) Focusing on vocabulary in the text by asking learners to find words that mean…

g) Focusing on grammar/structure in the text.

h) Asking learners to talk about their personal response to the text and its topic.

The above procedures clearly show that steps a), b), and c) belong to pre-reading activities of which purpose is mainly to provide help to facilitate learners in doing the reading tasks and to minimize their apprehension. Showing a picture in the first step, for example, is beneficial not only to generate learners' interest but also to activate their

schemata about the topic. Thus, it also functions to focus attention so that learners recall all of their previous knowledge of the world which is relevant with the topic. That, consequently, promotes psychological readiness towards the task.

Having known the title, when asked to make prediction about the contents of the text, learners are stimulated to articulate their knowledge about the topic. At this point, it is not important whether or not their predictions are true. The point is that making prediction naturally happens in real life and facilitates learners to anticipate the comprehension of the text. In the third step, when the teacher presents essential vocabulary, what might impede comprehension is lifted; hence, learners get easier to understand the text.

Steps d) and e) are the core activities of whilst-reading focusing on comprehending general ideas and specific information. This order, i.e. perceiving general ideas preceding that of specific information, is logical in the sense that it is easier to do that way than the other way around. The analogy is that knowing the head can be facilitative to understand the tail. That is the reason why one of the characteristics of effective reading is understanding general ideas is prior to scrutinizing the details.

Steps f) g), and h) are post-reading tasks to improve language knowledge. Step f) is to develop learners' mastery of vocabulary, whereas step g) is to reinforce and add their knowledge of grammar. This is consistent with the aims of teaching and learning reading in an EFL context, viz. introducing new language and recycling the target language in addition to improving the reading competence. In the last step, requiring the learners to express their personal response to the topic is intended to give learners chance to practice another language skill, i.e. speaking. These all represent an

integrative activity involving reading and speaking like an authentic communicative language use in real life.

Using Authentic Materials

In most English language classrooms learners follow some kind of text books. This may be supplemented by handouts or other learning materials specially designed for language learning. There are good reasons for using such non-authentic (pedagogic) materials as they often focus on discrete learning points and have a controlled gradual progression, etc. However, authentic materials may have some advantages over non-authentic ones. For instance, they may be more up to date, more interesting, more alive and factual.

Here are some criteria to take into account for evaluating authentic materials in order to use them in our language classrooms.

- ♦ Are the materials up to date?

- ♦ Are the materials likely to motivate learners? (Are they inherently interesting?)

- ♦ Do the materials have credibility? (Will the learners feel they come from a believable source?)

- ♦ Are the materials culturally appropriate, or do they provide an interesting view of another culture?

- ♦ Can learners relate to the materials on a personal level?

- ♦ Can the materials be used with classes of various levels of ability?

- ♦ Are the materials quick, easy, and cheap to prepare?

- ♦ Do the materials provide a good model of usable English?

- ♦ Are the materials flexible? (Can they be used in different ways?)

♦ Are the materials relevant with the prescribed syllabus?

If the answers to those questions are mostly confirmative, then, they are likely to be used in our classes. Otherwise, it is advised that the teachers consider finding more appropriate ones.

The following part presents some alternative tasks and activities that can be conducted in language classrooms using authentic materials, such as newspapers, magazines, sales fliers, and songs (adapted from Curriculum and Material Developer Team 2007).

Newspapers

- Students can use the advice column to work on modals. They write answers to the questions asked in the advice column or discuss points related to values, customs, etc.

- Students use the first paragraphs of a story to complete who, what, where, when (sometimes why) grids. Then, they give a headline and write their own stories.

- Students use graphs and charts to write expository texts, discuss the trends as reflected in the graphs and charts, or ask questions and give answers about them.

- Students read a book or movie review aloud and do global reading to determine if the reviewer likes it or not.

- Students choose a job or an advertisement from the newspaper, they then interview each other, or write an application letter in response to the advertisement.

Magazines

- Pictures can be used for description, comparison, or for writing mysteries or movie plots.

- Students use recipes to learn about procedures or sequences. Students can then write their own. They can also just use the pictures of well known food and write the recipe.

- Students analyze advertisements for audience, slogan, products being sold, logo, and sales techniques. Then, they create their own advertisements and explain them to the class.

Sales fliers (from supermarkets)

- This material is good for scan reading, for instance finding prices, products, sizes, dimensions, and available colors, etc.

- Students are given a list with specific qualities of certain items to buy and then have them calculate how much money they have spent. Other students ask – wh questions to find out about what they bought and how much it cost.

- Students are given a specific sum of (imaginary) money and they 'go shopping'. They tell the class the things they would like to buy and why. They may also do a role play as buyers and sellers.

Songs

- Teacher prepares cut-ups of lyrics and gets students to put them in order as they are listening to the song.

- Students do a gap-fill exercise from the lyrics.

- Teacher plays the song and asks learners to say whether the singer is happy, sad, jealous, angry, etc.

- Teacher plays the song and asks learners to work in groups to act out a promotional video for it, lip-synching if they want.

- Students write a review of the song.

The above alternative tasks and activities are quite possible to conduct in language classrooms implying that although the materials are authentic taken from real world and not designed for language teaching and learning purposes, yet, with the creativity and imagination of the teachers, they may become usable and interesting. The materials which are relevant and interesting or cognitively and emotionally engaging are more likely to be better and more effective. In that way, implementing communicative language teaching using authentic materials seems to go in line with the principles of "breaking the classroom walls to the open world" and "bringing the world to the classrooms".

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