

TEACHING READING TO JUNIOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

Teresa Flesher

The role of an English teacher, as I see it, is to be a facilitator of the language; that is to say, the teacher should provide the students with enough language skills to facilitate their communication learning process. That idea seems to fit neatly into the framework of the oral English class, but what about in a very large reading class? What is the role of a reading teacher in such a case? When I was faced with the prospect of teaching reading to fifty first-year students, ninety minutes a week, I wondered how effectively one teacher, among so many students, could determine whether they were learning the reading strategies and applying them. As I would be teaching fifty students at a time, it was obvious that the logistics of the tasks would be a determining factor. One question that concerned me, for example, was the technique of scanning. As both reading and scanning are silent activities, how could I be sure that all fifty students weren't continuing to read word for word? My search for the answer to this and other questions led me to discover ways to introduce the skills needed to facilitate more effective reading and to give the entire class a chance to do the exercises at a pace which could be considered reasonable. In this paper I would like to share some of those discoveries.

In the beginning of the course the students were introduced to the use of an English dictionary. This dictionary, with an extra column of information about grammar and usage next to the definitions on each page, a grammar section, and appendices on world geography, nationalities etc., could seem, at first, quite overwhelming to the students. So in order to get them using the dictionary I would some-

times have the students look up a word and give them a time limit to write down the most essential information about that word. A bonus point would be given to the person who finished first. The extra points came in the form of beads which I gave the students; at the end of class they returned the beads to me. I kept a record of these points in my book. When students accrued a certain number of points, their grade would go up a percentage. These beads were a powerful motivational factor which got the students diving into their dictionaries, thus, *getting practice at manipulating it while their minds were set on getting the point and not on tackling the dictionary!* I used the bead system in any situation where I wanted a quick response from the students and it worked well.

I used the idea of a time limit in many activities; partly because of the size of the class and also, because I hoped that learning to do the strategies at a certain pace would bring the students one step closer to acquiring effective reading skills. In one activity, I gave the students an eight-minute "test" in following directions; something which I emphasize greatly. In this "test", the students had instructions to do fourteen different activities. Question number one read; "Please read everything before you start." Number fourteen read, "Now that you have read through the test, don't do anything, just write your name and student number at the top right corner of your paper." It was a fun activity because some of the activities required answers, thus leaving no doubt as to who had followed directions properly and who hadn't. This took pressure off the "test" but at the same time everyone learned the importance of reading carefully when following directions.

The students were also taught ways to make reading an English newspaper easier. One of the reading strategies is to first look at the picture accompanying an article and to guess about the ensuing story. I gave the students magazine ads which I thought might interest them

TEACHING READING TO JUNIOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

and, using a bell to time them, gave them a few seconds to look at the ad and quickly guess what theme was being represented. Next, they passed the ad down the aisle to the next student and received a new one. Each time they were also given a few moments to write down what they thought the ad was about. As the students sit in rows, I turned this exercise into a competition to see which row could finish before the others. The timing was slow at first, but I gradually picked up the pace and this made it more challenging. Finally, I broke them up into groups and they had to make a headline based on the photograph of one of the magazine ads. This was an amusing exercise because some of the ads had famous Japanese people in them and consequently, imaginative stories could be invented about them. This activity was also useful because the students had to write in newspaper headline style which means keeping things short, sweet and to the point.

In order to check student's understanding of headline writing styles and consequently headline reading, I gave them an exercise consisting of expanding headlines into full sentences. This meant adding articles such as "a" , "the" , or adding the verb "to be" to a headline. From the following original headline, "Sleepwalker puts 2 in hospital", some funny sentences developed. For example "The sleepwalker puts 2 years in hospital" and another, "2 sleepwalkers are put in hospital". Many different versions were written by the students on the board this was also done in the form of a competition, and since often mistakes were the same, I didn't have to point my finger at any one nor repeat my corrections over and over again.

As an introduction to the idea of English news and the media, I used a listening, reading and writing exercise. At first the students listened to a simulated (but convincing) newscast on cassette. They had to write down words they could understand on a piece of paper. Then, as a group we guessed what the news was about by pooling

Teresa Flesher

together what students had written down. Next, I gave them a paper which had the same basic text as the cassette but with some differences; they had to locate and underline them while listening to the tape. This exercise increased their concentration as it was varied and required different skills. It exposed them to listening and trying to get the gist of realistic radio or television news reports. It also gave them confidence that yes, they could understand something as difficult as the news in a foreign language.

Finally, having the students wear name tags was a way to use the limited class time to a maximum. They enabled me to call on people quickly to come up as "volunteers" when I needed them and this cut down on hesitation and silence on the part of the students when a question was posed.

Teaching reading to young Japanese adults has been rewarding. Of course, one can never be 100% sure how many students will apply the reading strategies the next time they read in class and especially outside of class. But I hope that by actively manipulating pictures, articles and ideas taken from real newspaper and magazine sources, intentionally chosen to interest them, the students may have gained understanding of how to read more effectively by guessing, scanning, reading, confirming and even criticizing, something which for many of them was undoubtedly a novelty. I feel that these activities helped to give me a sense of whether the students were grasping the reading strategies or not. I hope that they will be useful to other reading teachers, especially those with the challenge of teaching large classes.