On Developing Skills of Reading Comprehension

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I. Introduction

In this rapidly changing age, the importance of reading can never be overemphasized, not only as a source of obtaining knowledge and information, but also as a means of widening one's horizens of understanding and pleasurable activity. It is the essential key to the success in all academic areas, because learning depends largely upon one's ability to interpret printed materials accurately and fully.

Inspite of its great importance, reading has endured many changing emphasis and many shifting conditions. In most reading classes based on grammar-translation approach, it is assumed that if a sutdent can translate, he can read. This is obviously not true. That is not reading for comprehension. On the other hand, by stressing too much emphasis on developing oral skills, listening and speaking, from the beginning stages of foreign language study, audio-lingual approach has sometimes given the errorneous impression of neglecting the reading skills. One reason for this is that reading was considered decoding speech written down, a skill that would naturally transfer from the command of oral skills. However, the spoken and written forms of a language differ qualitatively, both in vocabulary and syntax. Another reason is the lack of techniques for teaching reading, because the little knowledge is available about the reading process itself.

What is needed, then, is an approach that will help the students read the passage before them, and at the same time enable them to read with improved facility the next, which may be completely different and unrelated. We, as the teacher of English, should understand the processes involved in reading and help our students develop skills of reading which will lead them to be the efficient readers.

This paper is specifically concerned with the techniques and the supporting activities which can be applied for developing skills of reading comprehension.

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II. Definition of Reading and Its Process

1. What is Reading?

Since the different definitions of reading have been the basis for different goals for reading instruction, it is essential to distinguish between the two activities which go by the same name: vocalization and comprehension of meaning. Though both activities could be described by the word "reading," these two kinds of readers do very different things and thus have very different needs. Enunciating the sound symbolized by the printed or written marks may be considered to be "reading." The reading may be comprehensible to the listener, without necessarily the reader drawing much in the meaning from what he is enunciating. This kind of activity is one aspect of reading for which the student must be well trained, but it is a minor goal. Another kind of reading is that the student extract meaning from words or word groups while reading at reasonable speed without necessarily vocalizing what is being read. This is reading for comprehension.

In addition to the definition of reading, the distinction between intensive and extensive reading should be followed since it is basic to teaching reading.[1] In intensive reading, its major focus is on the study of the linguistic features, both syntactical and lexical, which will help the reader in decoding the message, and its related skills, such as developing strategies of expectation and prediction and guessing meaning from the context as well as using dictionaries effectively. In extensive reading, the approach is similar to that of reading in the native tongue, which means, reading at one's own level and pace, directly for meaning and which is the final goal of teaching reading. However, since the intensive reading is most basic and preceded by the extensive reading, this is what the teachers of English are primarily concerned about and where our efforts should be concentrated.

2. The Process of Reading

Though reading is as familiar a part as our everyday life, the details of its process are not fully understood even among the scholars in the field. Reading is sometimes referred to as a passive or receptive skill, but if we examine the processes involved in reading, it is far from passive. It includes all that goes on between intake—the stimulus of the printed word—and output—the reader's response in thought, spoken or written words, or action. According to Fries, the student is "developing a considerable range of habitual

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1) According to L. G. Kelly, 25 Centuries of Language Teaching (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1969), p. 131, Harold E. Palmer was the first to make this distinction.

responses to a specific set of patterns of graphic shapes."[2] The process of reading can be described as follows:

(1) Visual Reception Process. The reader gets the visual impressions from the chains of linguistic elements through his eyes. Then, the nervous impulses thus aroused are transmitted to the visual centers of the brain where they are "decoded" and their meaning is recognized. The words now have been perceived. To decode the meaning of those visual impressions, the students should learn to recognize the sound patterns represented by the graphic symbols and identify their combinations as language units and their relations to the others.

(2) Selection Process. Goodman calls fluent reading a "psycholinguistic guessing game" which requires "skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time."[3] When the eyes move across the line of print, not every element of graphic symbols is registered in the brain, rather only those which are selected for the purpose of decoding meaning leave the clear visual impressions in the brain.

(3) Perception Process. Perception is an active process by which visual impressions become meaningful. It involves understanding, comprehending, organizing through one's past experience and present needs, expectations, and personality. It is the first step in a sequence that leads to further abstraction and then to generalization. Individuals differ in their perceptual styles. Usually the better readers see words as wholes, whereas the poor readers generally perceive word fragments and tend to be preoccupied with unimportant details. Able readers recognize familiar syllables and words almost as quickly as individual letters and take in phrases and short sentences as readily as single words.

(4) Conceptualization. There is a reciprocal relation between perception and conceptualization. Conceptualization occurs when perceptions are grouped into larger patterns that embrace classes or categories. Concepts screen or filter impressions as they come into the mind. Perceptions are synthesized into concepts; concepts aid in the interpretation and organization of perceptions. Conceptualization contributes further to abstract thinking and generalization.

(5) High Levels of Association. It has been hypothesized that at the higher levels of association there are patterns, schema, or circuits—interrelated memory subsystems. As these are activated simultaneously, they become larger and better organized. Factual content will not be retained long unless it becomes integrated. As the interconnections of these memory systems are improved, the individual gains increased ability to interpret what he reads. For word-by-word reader, each association occurs separately, rather than

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2) Charles C. Fries, Linguistics and Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. 1963), p. 121
3) Kenneth S. Goodman, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game," in Language and Reading: An Interdisciplinary Approach, ed. D. V. Gunderson (Washington D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970), pp. 107–119

in a larger memory patterns. It is easy to see why the "whole perceiver" has an advantage over the ' part perceiver." Memory is not simply storing away impressions; it is retrieving what is relevant when it is needed. Thus the way a thing is learned helps to determine how it is applied.

These processes do not take place sequentially in time. They are, rather, simultaneous activities of mind. Or, at least, the intervals between these processes are so short (especially with good readers) that a reader is not conscious of them.

As a whole, reading is not just getting the message out of the page, though it is involved. It involves putting the message into the page.

III. Skills of Reading Comprehension

According to Goodman,[4] the proficient reader draws on three kinds of information in order to decode the massage: graphic information, syntactic information, and semantic information. In order to do this, the reader must acquire those skills which are needed in learning to read. However, when we teach our students, we have to bear the two things in our minds. First, skill development must proceed along an orderly and sequential path so that each skill in every phase of growth in reading becomes an essential building block which may support the more complex skills which are needed as reading becomes more difficult. Second, all skills require practice if they are to become habitual and automatic. Practice in skill development should be charactized by varieties of materials and techniques, so as to make the learner engage in an active, absorbing manner.

Over 200 skills have been identified as part of the act of reading in English. These skills may be grouped into two broad classifications: 1) the skill of word recognition and 2) the skill of sentence and paragraph comprehension. The description about each will be followed in detail.

1. Skills of Word Recognition

Vocabulary items will most likely be the largest source of difficulty to most of the students involved in reading, being unable to determine the meaning of a word, and thus being unable to understand what he is reading. To help our students guess intelligently at the meaning of words, the following techniques have to be taught to the students:

(1) Using Dictionary. This is the simplest technique for checking the meaning of the word. Since most words in English have more than one meaning, it is very important for us to teach our students how to isolate the correct meaning intended by the writer from the dictionary. The exercise like this will be helpful:

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4) Kenneth Goodman, "Analysis of Oral Reading Miscues," in Frank Smith ed., Psycholinguistics and Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), p. 164

Following is a list of four words with some of their meanings. These words are then used in sentences. First decide the part of speech for the word as it is used in the sentence. Then decide the correct meaning of the word.

Word List:

(Definitions are adapted from Webster's Third International Dictionary)

paper

noun	—(1) a sheet of vegetable fibers 6/1000 inch or thinner
	(2) document—usually used in the plural
	(3) newspaper
verb	—(1) to affix paper to something such as a wall
adjective	—(1) made completely or almost completely of paper
	(2) authorized or planned but not carried out

smell

verb	—(1) to get the odor of something through the nose
	(2) to give off an odor or scent
	(3) to have a bad odor
	(4) to appear evil, dishonest, or ugly
noun	—(1) the property of something that affects the nose
	(2) the general quality of something

Sentences:

examples: It was only a paper war.
          Part of Speech: adjective Meaning ____2____

1. The official government *paper* concerning recent economic agreements will be published next month.
      Part of Speech _____ Meaning _____
2. The whole atmosphere of this court *smells*. No one can get a fair trial here.
      Part of Speech _____ Meaning _____
3. *Paper* decorations for a party can be dangerous if they aren't fireproof.
      Part of Speech _____ Meaning _____
4. It was a crisp autumn morning and the air *smelled* especially fresh and clean.
      Part of Speech _____ Meaning _____
5. The prime Minister flatly denied the stories in the *papers* which said he would soon resign
      Part of Speech _____ Meaning _____
6. Many of the new cosmetics have the *smell* of lemon or other fruits.
      Part of Speech _____ Meaning _____ [5]

Though the dictionary is the surest source of getting the meaning of a word, the students should be advised not to reach indiscriminately for it, because it not only interrupts

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[5] Lois Irene Wilson, "Word Study Exercises–Using a Dictionary," mimeographed (English Language Institute, University of Pittsburgh).

the flow of reading, but also the context very often provides a clue to the meaning of a word or a phrase.

(2) Word Analysis. To interpret the meaning of words, the students should be taught to break down words into small elements: roots, stems, prefixes and suffixes, and their combination into words. By introducing to the students the meanings of frequently used stems and affixes, the students find the meaning of a difficult word by breaking it into small elements, then interpreting the meaning of each element in order to obtain the meaning of the entire word.

The teaching point of roots and prefixes is the lexical meaning of the forms, often in lists like this:

Words	Prefix	Roots
1. Precept	pre- (before)	capere (take, seize)
2. Detain	de- (away, from)	tenere (hold, have)
3. Intermittent	inter- (between)	mettere (send)
4. Offer	ob- (against)	ferre (bear, carry)
5. Insist	in- (into)	stare (stand)
6. Monograph	mono- (alone, one)	graphein (write)
7. Epilogue	epi- (upon)	legein (say, study)
8. Aspect	ad- (to, towards)	spicere (see)
9. Uncomplicated	un- (not)	plicare (fold)
	com- (together with)	
10. Nonextended	non- (not)	tendere (stretch)
	ex- (out of)	
11. Reproduction	re- (back, again)	ducere (lead)
	pro- (forward)	
12. Indisposed	in- (not)	ponere (put, place)
	dis- (apart from)	
13. Oversufficient	over- (above)	facere (make, do)
	sub- (under)	
14. Mistranscribe	mis- (wrong)	scribere (write)
	trans- (across, beyond)[6]	

Exercises typically look like this:

Fill in the blank with the proper negative prefix.
1. He always _____ connects the wires.
2. He always _____ pronounces the words.
3. His work is completely _____ satisfactory.[7]

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6) Edward Fry, Teaching Faster Reading (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 126
7) Norris, citing a popular text.
* Footnotes 5, 6 & 7 are copied from Teaching English as a Second Language: Techniques and Procedures, C.B. Paulston and Mary N. Bruder. (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, Inc. 1976) pp. 191–192, pp. 184–185

However, the teacher's special attention should be paid to the fact that some words, such as *catastrophe, discern, discuss*, etc. are not applied to the rule of these prefixes, and they should be treated and memorized as individual words. This rule of roots and prefixes have to be learned as a recognition purpose only, not for production purpose.

The teaching point of the derivational suffixes is the syntactic signals for parts of speech which is the most important aspect of word formation study since recognition of word class is crucial in figuring out syntactic relationships. The students should be given contextualized practice with word forms; Hirasawa and Markstein provide numerous exercises of this type:[8]

> to diseriminate, discriminating, discriminatory, discrimination
> 1. The speaker was accused by many listeners in the audience of having made unfounded and _____ remarks.
> 2. Give two women $50.00 each to buy a dress, and one of them will come back with a much nicer dress than the other because of more _____ taste.
> 3. Employers doing business with the U.S. government may not _____ on the basis of race, religion, sex or age when hiring employees.
> 4. Despite recent progress in the U.S. in the area of civil rights, many Americans still feel that they are experiencing subtle forms of _____ .

In the above exercise, however, students' attention should be called to the plural forms of the same word, such as, *discriminating* and *discriminatory*. They are confusing in that they bring together several forms with similar meaning for productive use where there is no rule and the items have to be learned separately and as whole words.

(3) Guessing Meaning from the Context. The clues to the meaning of the unknown words are most likely to be found in the context. Though the dictionary provides the surest access to the meaning, it will make the reader lose the thread of continuity, if he depends on it too much, and thus make him lose interest, which will eventually lead to giving up the act of reading. Therefore, the student should be advised to use the dictionary as his last resort.

In view of the above fact, the student must develop his skill in finding the context clues through the lexical and/or situational context. Lexical clue refers to the meaning of those surrounding words which will strongly influence the probability of the meaning of the unknown word.

Look at these sentences:

> He shot but missed the *shrdlu* completely.
> His boots made *shrdlus* on the polished floor.
> This lighthouse is an important *shrdlu* for pilots.

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8) L. Hirasawa and L. Markstein, Developing Reading Skills, (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1974)

His *shrdlus* were always high in school.[9]

All the sentences in the exercise have *mark* for *shrdlu,* and we guess it from the meaning of the surrounding words.

Even with this lexical context when we are still uncertain, we, then, come to look at the situational context, which will help decide the direction of our guess. However, foreign students are unfamiliar with culture-bound situations and this is frequently a cause of difficulty to them when involved in reading.

A reader will find at least seven types of context clues in the sentences:

1) Direct explanation. The unknown word is explained in the sentence.
   To talk aimlessly in a rambling way about the weather, the war, your new dress, the class play is to carry on a desultory conversation.

2) Experience. The meaning of the unknown word can be supplied by something in the student's life-experience.
   At Thanksgiving and Christmas indigent families are fed by the Salvation Army.
   An exploding skyrocket set fire to a crowded dance hall and fourteen persons were injured.

3) Comparison and contrast. The unknown word has a meaning that is opposite to that of known word.
   They were as different as day and night. He was highly excitable but she was phlegmatic.
   Ed was talkative while Bill remained taciturn.

4) Synonym or restatement.
   "Give me excess of it, that surfeiting, the appetite may sicken and so die."
   The sorcerer, a wizard of great reputation for villainy, gazed scornfully at his victim.

5) Familiar expression or language experience. The student can decipher the word by drawing on his acquaintance with everyday expressions and common language patterns.
   The drowning man was carried to the beach, where he was given artificial respiration,.

6) Summary. The unknown word summarizes the ideas that precede or follow it,.
   The stories invented from bits and scraps of gossip soon developed into a "whispering campaign" and an innocent student became the victim of calumny.
   At the age of eighty-five the king was still playing skillful game of tennis. He seldom missed his daily swim. For a man of his age he was very robust.

7) Reflection of a mood or situation. The unknown word fits a situation or a mood that has already been established.
   The lugubrious wails of the gypsies matched the dreary whistling of the wind in the deserted woods.
   As she said goodnight after the prom, the boy she cared for most asked her to wear his fraternity pin. Her joy was ineffable.[10]

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9) Charles C. Fries, Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language, (Ann Arbor. The University of Michigan Press, 1945) p. 40
10) Strand, McCullough, & Traxler, The Improvement of Reading 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. 1967), pp. 230-231

As illustrated above, many hints to the word meaning lie within the sentences and the students must be advised to look for the various types of context clues and word analysis to derive the meaning of the unknown words.

2. Skills of Sentence and Paragraph Comprehension

(1) Skills of Sentence Comprehension

It frequently happens that although a student knows every word in a sentence, he still cannot understand what the sentence means, especially when it is long and complicated. This is because the student does not know how to analyze the sentence and to relate ideas to one another within a sentence and between sentences in paragraph. To help the student comprehend such sentences, we have to teach such techniques as follows: 1) sentence analysis, 2) recognition of punctuation clues, and 3) recognition of singnal words.

1) Sentence analysis. This is the most essential and vital skill to be acquired by the student. The proficient reader draws on systactic information as well as lexical in order to decode the message. As Wilson points out, structural clues are especially important for foreign students because they have a limited vocabulary and can, therefore, not afford to ignore structural cues as native speakers often do.[11] Whenever a student does not understand a sentence, he should analyze the sentence by breaking it down into its parts, such as the main verb, the subject, an object, a complement, and the modifiers. In order to do this properly, he must be taught to recognize various structural patterns which occur late in the curriculum for production but are needed early in reading and those patterns which occur mainly in writing. The following is the list of grammatical patterns to be taught for recognition in reading:

a. postponed subject after *it* and after *there is/there are* (it is invariably a wise man who. . .; there are more than twenty buildings on the campus)
b. conjunctions
c. substituion words (nor *did* he, she said *so*)
d. sentence connectives (*finally, moreover,* etc.) and conventions of punctuation
e. passives, statives, and irregular past participles
   with agent (The committee *was appointed by* the president.) without specific agent (The health service *is located* in the main building.)
f. relative clauses
   with subject focus (The man *who went to Washington* is my cousin.)
   with object focus (The man *whom my cousin saw* went to Washington.)
   possessive relative clause (The man, *whose cousin you know,* went to Washington.)

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11) Lois Irene Wilson, "Reading in the ESOL Classroom," TESOL Quarterly 7, no. 3 (September 1973): pp. 259–267

in prepositional phrase (The man *to whom I sent the letter from whom I received a letter* went to Washington.)

with ellipsis (The man my cousin saw went to Washington.)

g. nominalizations

John's late arrival
That John arrived late
For John to arrive late
John's arriving late } was surprising.
What John said
I like *to see John arrive late.*

h. infinitives

with *it* transposition (*It* is fun *to travel*)

with noun preceding as subject of infinitive (He wanted *John to go.*)

with noun preceding as object of infinitive (Students should have *books to read.*)

in order to (He came *to* get his book.)

i. participial constructions

with subjet omitted

present participial phrase (*Travelling to Washington,* he met my cousin.)

past participial phrase (*Asked about his health,* he only smiled.)

with subject expressed

present participial phrase (He saw *horses running across the plain.*)

past participial phrase (*His work finished,* he went home. *With expletives deleted*, the document is still shocking. *Having eaten the apple* Adam repented.)

j. transposed elements

adverbial clause in initial position (*Although most people deplore it*, graffiti are widespread.)

initial prepositional phrase with subject-verb inversion (*Of special interest to teachers is* the Language Methodology Center.)

initial adverb with *do* in statement form (*Rarely did* he fail to do his lessons.)

topicalization (*Intuition* as discovery procedure he found rather doubtful.)

k. negation

scope (I don't think I can come [I can't come].)

double negatives (No one has nothing to offer to society [Everyone has something].)[12]

2) Recognizing punctuation clues. A knowledge of the explanatory functions of comma, period, dashes, colons, semicolons, brackets, etc. will hlep the student understand the meaning of words and sentences. Thus, the student must recognize the meaning and use of punctuation marks properly.

3) Recognizing signal words. The students need to learn these words which typically

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12) Paulston & Bruder, Teaching English as a Second Language, Techniques and Procedures (Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, Inc. 1976) pp. 178–179

go with the persuasive writing. This is a word or phrase that serves as a logical connector in a sentence, between sentences, or between paragraphs. The students must pay closer attention to these connectives and to try to interpret what it is they indicate in each case.

The following are some of the most frequently used connectives:

a. Addition: and, as well as, besides, again, furthermore, in addition, etc.
b. Cause-effect relationships: accordingly, so, thus, in short, hence, due to, as a result, etc.
c. Comparison: like, unlike, in the same way, etc.
d. Condition: if, when, unless, etc.
e. Contrast: but, however, though, despite, yet, etc.
f. Doubt or hypothesis: possibly, probably, maybe, etc.
g. Emphasis: in particular, actually, above all, in fact, of course, etc.
h. Examples: for instance, for example, etc.
i. Explanation: that is, in other words, namely, etc.
j. Purpose: so that, in order to, for the purpose of, etc.
k. Repitition: similarly, likewise, in like manner, etc.
l. Sequence: first, later, eventually, lastly, etc.
m. Space: to (on) the right, close at hand, overhead, etc.

The usefulness of these connectives as contextual clues is invaluable.

An effective means of improving sentence comprehension might be through the practice of cloze exercises. The "cloze" procedure is based on the gestalt idea of closure—the impulse to complete a structured whole by supplying a missing element. The test or exercise is composed of passages from which every fifth or sixth word except proper noun and numbers is omitted and the student fills in the blanks left by the missing words as in the exercise below:

Nothing is more difficult (   ) this world than to (   ) a book and then (   ) express clearly and truly (   ) a few lines exactly (   ) the literary value of (   ) book. There are (   ) more than twenty people (   ) the world who can (   ) this, for the experience (   ) well as the capacity (   ) must be enormous.

The cloze procedure is essentially restricted to the contextual level of the sentence. Letters are guessed at with reference to the world as context; lexical and structural items are supplied using contextual clues at the sentence level. These exercises should be sequenced from short to long passages and from high frequency structures to low probability sentences. The vocabulary should range from high association sets in beginning passages to low association probabilities in more advanced materials.

(2) Skills of Paragraph Comprehension

Even though a student understands all the sentences in a reading passage, it sometimes happens that he still does not understand what it says as a whole. This is because he does

not understand how the material is organized. In order to help the student cope with this problem, he needs to work through exercises on finding the key words, the key sentence, and the main thought in a paragraph. Of course, it is easy enough to say, "Learn to find the key words and the main ideas." but it is not as simple as that. Only an understanding of the structure of paragraph is helpful.

To check whether the student understands the reading material, he will be given any type of comprehension questions, either in after-questions or in before-questions.[13] The purpose of after-questions which are asked after the actual reading is to check the understanding of the reading material, whereas that of before-questions is to call student's attention on the important points of the reading passage.

Norris outlines the five types of comprehension questions:

Type 1: Information from the reading sufficient for the answer is contained in the question itself.
    a. Answerable simply Yes/No or True/False
     Before Frank left for town, did his wife hand him an umbrella? (Yes or No)?
     Before Frank left for town, his wife handed him an umbrella. (True or False)
    b. Multiple choice of answers is given with the question.
     What did Frank's wife hand him before he left?
     _____ an umbrella, _____ a piece of cloth, _____ a letter

Type 2: Answerable with information quoted directly from the reading selection. (WH questions—who, when, where, what—usually not why or how questions.)
    What did Frank's wife hand him before he left for town?
    Answer: (She handed him) a piece of cloth (before he left for town.)

Type 3: Answerable with information acquired from the reading selection, but not by direct quotation from a single sentence (Usually why or how questions.)
    How did Frank explain his difficulties to his wife?
    Answer: First, Frank told her . . . Then he said . . .

Type 4: Answerable from inference or implication from the reading; the information is not stated explicitly in the selection.
    How do you suppose Frank's wife felt about his explanation?
    Answer: Well, since she looked cross, I suppose that she . .

Type 5: The answer requires evaluation or judgment relating the reading selection to additional information or experience of the reader.
    What would you have done in Frank's place?[14]

The questions in Type 1 through 3 are the most frequently and widely used ones. By adding those questions to the oral discussion of the reading, it will serve double purposes for both oral and reading comprehensions.

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13) Kelly, p. 136
14) William Norris, "Teaching Second Language Reading at the Advanced Level: Goals, Techniques, and Procedures," TESOL Quarterly 4, no. 1 (March 1970): pp. 28–29

IV. Conclusion

While everyone knows the importance of reading as a cherishable skill to be retained throughout the life, not much work has been done so far in the area of developing reading materials. If the efficient reading is what the teaching of reading is for, the students need to be provided with good reading materials and exercises which will help improve those necessary skills involved in reading. I believe that reading skills are simply a matter of practice but can be taught and developed, and thus they should be incorporated into the reading program from the very beginning.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest some of the techniques which can be adapted and applied by the teachers in their classes so as to help students acquire skills of reading comprehension. On the other hand, I strongly urge that those who are responsible for curriculum planning pay more attention to the needs of the students and develop the reading program which consists of a closely coordinated program of reading skills and of actual reading. I do believe that provision of good reading materials and acquisition of competent reading skills are the only sure way to accomplish the ultimate goal, that is, efficient reading.

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