

Comprehending the Text : The Aim
of Developing Reading Skills

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Comprehending the Text

Reading comprehension

Abstract

Reading of English texts seems to be very important in today's process of flowing information. Also in schools reading can be used as a major way of receiving new information. However, English teachers use this possibility only a little, evidently and mainly for ignorance of reading process substance. The focus of reading process should be understanding the written text, which means extracting the required information from the text as efficiently as possible. Therefore in reading lessons teachers should use strategies that will develop students' ability to comprehend what is read. Reading requires specific reading skills that will make you a successful reader. To avoid the superficial approach to reading skill, it is useful if the teacher gets more knowledge about the reading process.

I have been teaching for four years at a school. Students I teach are from fourteen to eighteen years and it seems they are either beginners or of intermediate English level. In my final paper I chose the age group of seventeen-eighteen years. It means an intermediate level of English, where I used several reading exercises, and my experience from reading lessons is presented in this paper.

What is, in fact, reading comprehension? In the reading process, it is not important to understand everything

I. Comprehending the text

A. Reading comprehension

Reading is one of the skills which an English teacher uses in his lesson. It is a process that leads to comprehension of some text. To be the most effective, reading lessons should use strategies that will develop a student's ability to comprehend what is read. Teacher should prepare a wide range of exercises to motivate students and make them successful readers. Experts say that teacher should know several different ways of reading and also recognize which way of reading is the best for accomplishing a reading task. When the teacher first picks up something to read, he has several basic skills, or ways of reading, to choose from. He can start either by skimming, scanning, reading for main idea and so on. It, of course, means that he knows how useful these skills are, and he mainly wants to do a reading activity by this way, although mostly it requires more teacher's work.

Reading lessons attract my attention : how to prepare a suitable text, how to motivate students, which skills and strategies to use in reading lessons for right students' comprehending. I have been teaching for four years at secondary school. Students I teach are from fourteen to eighteen years old and it means they are either beginners or of intermediate English level. For my final paper I chose the age group of seventeen--eighteen years, it means an intermediate level of English, where I practised several reading exercises, and my own experience from these reading lessons is presented in my paper.

What is, in fact, reading comprehension? In the reading process it is not important to understand everything but the

reader should be able to get the main idea and also extract specific information. Swan mentions that "If we say that a student is good at comprehension, we mean that he can read accurately and efficiently, so as to get the maximum information from a text with the minimum of misunderstanding. We may also mean (though this is not quite the same) that he is able to show his understanding by re--expressing the content of the text--for instance, by writing sentences or paragraphs in answer to questions, or by summarising the text" (Swan, 1992: 2).

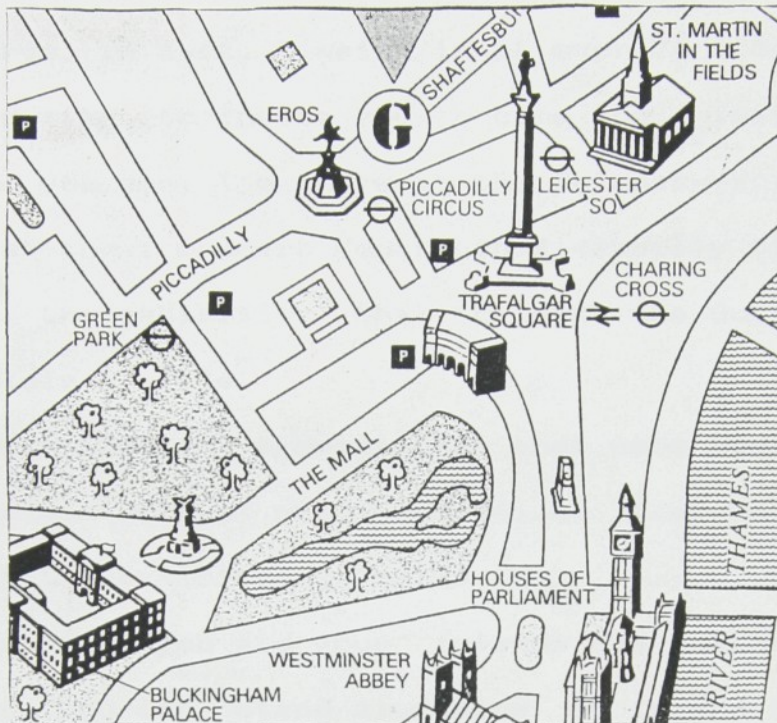
B. Factors influencing students' comprehension

Success in reading comprehension is influenced by many factors. One of them is a suitable text and its language. As for choosing the text I write about it in one of the next chapters. Some reasons for failure in comprehension could be students' defective reading habits and an incorrect teacher's approach. In my opinion, not all students read efficiently--some are used to reading slowly and paying a lot of attention to individual points, some read quickly and overlook a lot of particular details, although they understand the main idea.

As regards the teacher's approach to the reading process, I think it is necessary to say that reading is very often mistaken for practising pronunciation or grammar translation. Students should not receive the idea that reading is grammar, but that one reads for information.

The next reading skills are *overviewing* and *skimming*. *Overviewing*, as Shafer and McDonald write, is a quick look at the parts of a book or reading passage to see what it is about and what kind of information can be found in it (Shafer and McDonald, 1996:3). A reader can read the title,

from both Piccadilly and Leicester Square tube stations.



Task 1

Decide whether these statements are true or false according to the text and the map.

- The Guinness World of Records is opposite Buckingham Palace.
- This exhibition is divided into different sections.
- Computers are used to enter all the sports records.
- The Trocadero Centre is not very far from Piccadilly tube station.

Text (2)



My name is Robert Earl Hughes. You haven't heard of me? Well, you'd find it hard to miss me.

3. Elephant Polo

Lesson Plan

Age Level: 17 - 18

Level of English Knowledge: intermediate

Time: 30 minutes

Materials: the text and the photo (people playing elephant polo)

Aim of Lesson: reading for gist, revision of comparative adjectives, new vocabulary

Pre - reading activity

1. Questions

Look at this rather strange photo.



What do you think people and elephant are doing?

In your opinion, is this animal frightening? Why?

Do you know any sports that involve animals?

Could you guess the rules of this game?

4. The Story of King Arthur

Lesson Plan

Age Level: 17 - 18

Level of English Knowledge: intermediate

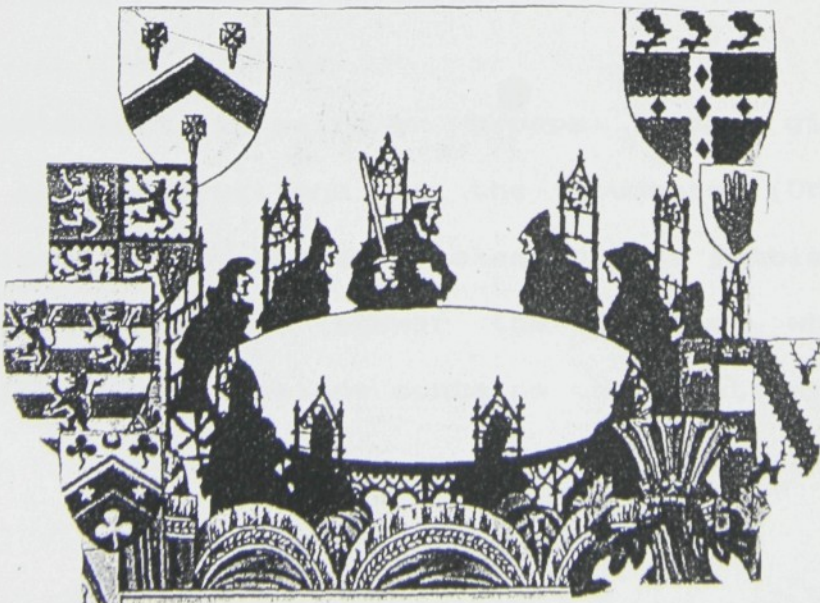
Time: 40 minutes

Materials: envelopes with jumbled text (the number of the envelopes depends on the number of the students' groups), the picture of King Arthur and his knights sitting around the Round Table

Aim of Lesson: putting in correct order a jumbled text, reading for extracting some information - (answering the question), revision of the Past Simple Tense

I cut the particular paragraphs of the text and put them into the envelopes. I needed five envelopes because I divided students into five groups and each group had one envelope. I added one question about the text to each envelope.

I used this picture for motivating of students:



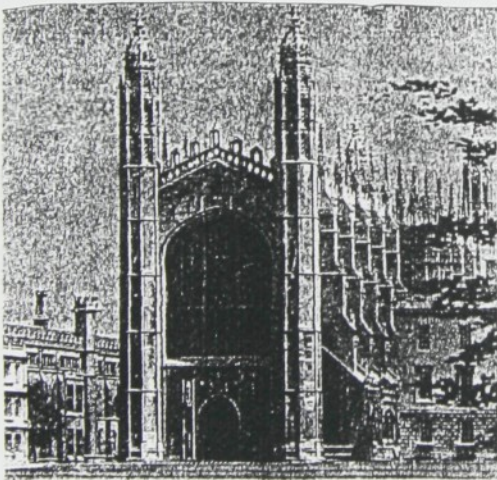
Post - reading activity

1. True or False?

- a) Cambridge University started during the thirteenth century.
- b) The most recent College is Peterhouse.
- c) The first women's college was opened in 1954.
- d) Now there are equal numbers of men and women.
- e) The Cambridge Science Park was established for universities' contact with high technology.

2. Look at the picture of King's College Chapel.

What could you say about it?



3. You have read about Cambridge Science Park.

What is the purpose of a science park?

Note

I used this text as a supplement to the realia lesson in which students learned about some well-known towns in Great Britain. Neither questions at the beginning nor text are particularly difficult for students. They usually write correctly post-reading exercise "True or False" and have not difficulties with next exercises. What I want from them is that

Mirka Trojanová

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In her paper Mirka Trojanová prepared a collection of texts that can be utilized in teaching intermediate students. She expresses repeatedly her opinion that reading is neglected by majority of teachers or mistaken for practising pronunciation or translation but this statement is not illustrated or proved in any way. The fact the teachers neglect reading or do not utilize it fully is explained by lack of understanding on the side of teachers and partly by the fact that most of textbooks suffer from a lack of good reading texts.

Mirka Trojanová gives a thorough explanation of comprehending the text, reading comprehension, she stresses the necessity to use strategies developing comprehension and talks about possible preparations or adaptations of the chosen text. For all of her comments she provides enough quotations from experts' opinions to illustrate and support them.

With each text and lesson plan she adds the age level, time for which the activity is planned, material needed, clearly defined aims of the lesson, and stages. She also adds pictures that can be used with her texts.

All of the lesson plans describe in detail all the pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities and procedures that the author uses.

Each lesson plan is followed by a detailed description of her experience from the classes, where she describes her problems and suggests possible variations in the future.

With each text a source where the text was taken from is added. Her texts are suitable for the chosen age level, motivating and interesting and the variety of activities is encouraging.

In the conclusion she summarises the main ideas of her project and confirms that development of individual reading strategies that she has been dealing with in the project leads to comprehending the reading text.

The project is written with a generally good level of English.

I recommend the paper to be evaluated as a passing one.

Liberec, 16 June, 1994

PhDr. Ivana Pekařová

