

The Basics of Teaching Reading Skills: Pt. 2

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Part One of this article appeared in the previous issue of *The ETJ Journal*. It covered the pre-reading skills of previewing and predicting. The while-reading activities of skimming and scanning will be examined in this issue.

While-reading activities improve the students' ability to interact with, and understand texts. Most students are accustomed to using only "intensive" reading skills and they feel that if they don't read and understand every word they will not understand the text. Skimming and scanning practice activities are good ways to help students realize that intensive reading is not always necessary, and that they can save time by:

Scanning if they are looking for specific information

Or, skimming if they want to get a general idea of what the text is about.

SCANNING

Scanning involves reading something quickly to find a particular piece of information, and ignoring everything else. It can be done with low level students because they don't need to understand all of a text to extract specific information from it. The students are accustomed to doing scanning activities like this in their own language, so it should be an easy skill for them to develop in English.

Examples of activities to practice scanning include:

1) Give the students a train timetable and ask them to find out what time the train leaves a particular station. They only need to scan the timetable to find the information they want - the rest of the timetable is not relevant. Alternatively, they could search the Internet, for timetables and hotel information, to plan a trip.

2) Give each student a copy of a TV schedule from an English language newspaper. Ask them to find

out what time a certain TV program starts and finishes.

3) Look at the contents page of a textbook to find the page number of a particular section. Alternatively at the beginning of the year, give the students an exercise to orientate them to their new textbook, e.g. 'How many units are there?' 'Which unit reviews past tense?' 'Where is?'

4) Scan a biography (or an encyclopedia) to find specific factual information such as date of birth, important events and places.

5) Use a dictionary to find the meaning of a particular word.

6) Look at a weather report and decide if they need to carry an umbrella tomorrow or not.

SKIMMING

Skimming requires a higher level of reading skills and involves reading a text quickly to find the main facts or ideas in it, to get a general idea of the content. Skimming is an extremely useful skill when students are deciding which sections of a book will be the most useful for their research. Also, when they are about to begin reading a new book they can get a quick idea of the content by skimming the book first.

Examples of activities to practice skimming include:

1) Match the titles of newspaper articles with the stories. As the students' ability improves, limit the time allowed to do the activity. This could be used as part of a media unit, or perhaps when they are learning to write recounts.

2) Match the greetings and final paragraphs with the main part of a letter. (Use 3 or 4 letters with the different sections jumbled up). This could be used in a letter writing unit - use letters of the same style that you are teaching the students to write.

3) Give the students a list of the

key words that they will find in the text that they are about to read. The students read through the list of words and then give their ideas what they think the article will be about. After expressing their ideas, let them skim the text (with a time limit) and then compare their ideas with what they read in the text. This activity is extremely useful when introducing a new topic of study. It helps prepare the students for the topic that they are about to study and makes the reading of the text much easier.

4) Show the students a newspaper headline and ask them to predict what the article will be about. As in the previous example, once they have made their predictions ask them to skim the text to check how accurate they were.

5) Prepare two different texts, and cut each into paragraphs. Mix the paragraphs from both texts together. Give the students the jumbled paragraphs and ask them to separate the two texts, and then to sequence each one. Once they have assembled the two texts, allow them time to read them intensively. It is important that the two texts are at a level that the students can differentiate by skim reading only. If the texts are too difficult, or too similar in their content, the students will be forced to do intensive reading. An interesting and enjoyable way to finish off a unit of work is to do this activity using samples of student writing. An alternative is to use texts that relate to the topic being studied; the two texts could be used as the starting point of a discussion, or for reading comprehension exercises. Through the process of reassembling the texts they become more intimately aware of what they are reading. It is not advisable to do it as a one-off activity; there must be a reason for the students to read the texts.

6) Give the students a variety of emails and ask them to identify

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which ones are junk mail (spam) and which ones should be kept for later in-depth reading.

7) A simpler activity for lower level students is to ask them to sequence the pages of a chapter – don't forget to remove the page numbers, otherwise they will not be practicing any reading skills at all. Then use the text for extensive reading practice.

FINAL COMMENTS ON TEACHING READING SKILLS

All of the practice activities in these two articles work best if they are part of a larger unit of work. Using a text as a one-off reading exercise will have little relevance for the students but if it is part of a wider topic, the students will be more actively involved and are more likely to understand the value of learning the reading skill.

Texts selected for use in activities designed to help students develop their reading skills should not be too difficult. If they are, the students will be too busy trying to understand the meaning of the text rather than developing the particular skill the activity was designed for. Therefore, texts must be at an appropriate level for the students.

I find it necessary to set a time for these practice activities so that the students are forced to read quickly and only get the information that they need. Many students will be motivated to read faster if an element of competition is added. You could divide the class into groups and award points to the group who can find the information the fastest. The instructions must very clear so that the students know exactly what they are required to do, and know that they will not be asked about the

finer details of the text.

Once students have been taught how to preview, predict, skim and scan, their reading ability should improve, but it is essential that after these skills have been taught they must be practiced, and practiced again, so that students remember them and are able to use them consistently and successfully.

The reading skills we have looked at can be practiced with graded readers. For example, skimming the first and last paragraphs, and looking at headings will help them decide which book to choose, then once they have chosen a book, skimming the whole book will give them an idea of the main characters and some of the important points in the story. Once they have a basic idea of what the book is about, it will be easier to read.