Planning reading tasks for the EFL classroom

A checklist of things to consider when planning reading activities for our foreign language learners

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Instilling the ‘reading bug’ to our learners may be one of the greatest achievements of a language teacher. We need to make our students want to read in the TL not because they have to but because they want to. This starts in the language classroom by choosing interesting texts, relevant to their age, level and needs.

To achieve that, we need to influence them, to give them a reason to want to read. We could suggest websites, people to follow, articles, literary texts, anything that might seem interesting to them and they could read in their free time. Once our learners have adopted this as a habit, they will gradually start building their TL vocabulary and will eventually start thinking in the target language. Building an exchange library in the foreign language classroom where students can borrow and exchange books they can read in their free time is very useful in boosting reading and language input.
The main aims of a reading activity
(pre-reading, main task or post-reading)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>to arouse interest</th>
<th>to link to other skills ex. writing, speaking</th>
<th>to introduce new words and concepts</th>
<th>to activate background knowledge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to develop critical evaluation/thinking skills</td>
<td>to provide a reason for reading</td>
<td>to activate language knowledge</td>
<td>to practise skills and strategies</td>
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<td>to identify gaps in knowledge</td>
<td>to reflect on content</td>
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But what how can we make sure that the tasks that accompany the texts we give to the classroom are effective enough to foster language acquisition? In order to design a reading task that will promote language learning and learner motivation it is important to ponder on some key questions during the planning stage of the activity. Below you will find a checklist of things to consider when planning reading activities for the foreign language classroom:

**Will my learners feel motivated to read the text?**

Texts that focus on topics that might trigger our learners’ interest will automatically boost their intrinsic motivation will turn reading in the TL into an enjoyable process. We must encourage our students to lower their inhibitions, their fear of the unknown and to learn how to embrace the foreign language text. Our ss need to start feeling confident enough to read in the foreign language and be motivated to do so.

**Is the text authentic? Is the task authentic/innovative/motivating?**

**Text and task authenticity**

The input our learners receive from extensive reading is an invaluable source of new lexis, which they will start absorbing and hopefully adopt in their writing and speech, turning the passive vocabulary they have acquired into active. As a result, intensive training on reading in the TL and a *variety of input* are very important. Teachers need to make sure that they use a variety of *authentic materials* from different sources, ex brochures, the web, newspapers, magazines, books. The selection of these texts should be handled with extra
care and caution. Their authenticity needs to be verified and the lexis and grammar the passage contains should be carefully checked.

Along with authentic texts we should also focus on creating authentic tasks and grade them based on our classrooms specific needs. Variety kills boredom and motivates learners. Teachers could step away from the reading activities suggested in the coursebooks and use innovative exercise types to accompany the reading passage (hands on materials/ cut out paragraphs/reordering/giving a title to each paragraph, etc.). Let us keep in mind here that reading is not just an individual process. Group work or pair work could be very useful as they also promote peer to peer interaction and enhance student talking time.

**Does the task cater for the different learning styles? Does it promote learner cooperation? Can the activity be used for group work/pair work?**

**Is the task suitable for my learners’ level and needs? Is the language used in the reading passage of the appropriate level for my class? Can my learners guess the meaning of the unknown words using contextual clues?**

We can read and absorb the information really fast as long as what we read makes sense. The reading passage therefore needs to be meaningful and have cohesion. If our students have to work on a difficult and confusing text that contains too much information that they cannot understand, then they stop ‘absorbing’ the knowledge. They can easily get perplexed and demotivated. We thus need to make sure that the text we choose and its accompanying tasks are appropriate for our learners and match their level and needs.

In order to facilitate reading in the EFL classroom and to make sure that our learners understand what the purpose of the activity is, we first need to trigger their imagination and activate the relevant ‘schemata’ in their brains. Using realia and visual stimuli in the pre-reading stage can be very useful in attracting our learners’ attention and arousing their interest. We need to make them predict what follows, to help them make guesses about the topic of the text and give them a purpose to read. This brainstorming during the lead in stage will attract the learners’ attention and will thus foster their motivation.

Clear instructions are also crucial at this point as the learners need to know why they are reading the text and what they should focus on. Teachers should also consider pre-teaching some key vocabulary that could facilitate the reading process and help learners focus on the overall aim of the reading task.

**How effectively did the activity help my students to comprehend the whole text? Did my learners practice using their predictive skills?**

Just as they do in their mother tongue, our learners need to have expectations regarding what they will be reading and make predictions about what is to be read. When we read in our first language we deploy a variety of skills depending on the nature of the text. We use different techniques when reading a train timetable, a newspaper article or a job
advertisement. In our native language this process is mainly spontaneous and we seem to be somehow unconsciously trained on how to approach each text type. Our background knowledge also helps us understand what we read. We use the information stored in our brain in order to decipher the meaning behind the text.

Just as we don’t read everything in the same way in our mother tongue, the same thing counts for the TL. So when preparing a reading task for our EFL learners we need to keep this process in mind. Our main focus should not be to test reading but to teach this skill and introduce our learners to the different strategies they can deploy when approaching a text depending on its nature and the purpose of reading. Our learners need to match up the predictions they have made to what is found in the text and make new predictions based on the information they receive from the passage.

**What are the main aims of the task? Which reading skills will my learners practise?**

**Focus on the ‘gist’ vs focus on extracting specific information**

It is important to keep in mind that reading basically means comprehension. It is successful when it establishes understanding. Our number one priority in the EFL classroom for this skill should thus be to train our students and provide them with the appropriate input and practice in order to make them skillful readers in the TL. The teacher’s goal should be to instill the knowledge and the reading strategies that will enable his/her students to read in the TL with ease and to successfully extract all the information they want from the reading passage.

When people read in a language other than their mother tongue, they seem to forget all about the different reading strategies they normally use in their L1. Foreign language students in particular may tend to pause many times during their reading and overuse their dictionaries in order to look up all the unknown terms they encounter. It is thus crucial to help them realize that using this approach they are losing focus and are distancing themselves from the initial purpose of the reading task.

Our students need to receive adequate practice on how to easily grasp the main points of a text (skimming) and on how to detect and extract specific information from a passage (scanning). They need to be trained on how to deduct meaning from context, on how to detect and use clues in the passage to understand what the writer is suggesting. Training them to read for gist and read for specific information will help them in their future development, not only in their language exams but also in facing real life situations in the TL.

**Are the reading skills in the activity useful in real life? Does the task promote learner interaction?**

**Focus on student collaboration: reading as an ‘active’ skill, not just a ‘passive’ one**
Reading may be a receptive skill but our learners should not be viewed as passive recipients when focusing on a text. We need to make them actively involved in the process, not only in the warm up stage but also in the actual reading part. They need to be the discoverers, the ones who control the flow of the activity and to know what to do at all times.

Reading may be a passive skill but that does not mean that it cannot be combined with communicative tasks that encourage learner involvement. We also need to make sure that the text we choose is not over explicit and that it leaves room for inference from the part of our learners. For effective learning to take place, Harmer (2001) reiterates the importance of active learner involvement in the reading process and the role of “prediction” from the part of the students. He also stresses out the need to encourage our learners to respond to the “content” of the reading text and “not just the language”.

We therefore need to be careful with our scaffolding and the amount of information we give to the class. If the students can guess the meaning of new lexis and grammar from the context we need to give them space to work things out for themselves and learn through discovery. Blending the activities and giving them opportunities for pair work and group work is also important here as many of our learners can benefit and learn from collaborating with others.

Is the reading task coherent with the rest of the lesson? Can I design a post-reading activity based on it?

Finally, it is important to always ask ourselves whether we can come up with follow up language work after the main reading task or integrate reading with another skill. The task sequence needs to blend nicely in the whole lesson plan and the various stages need to make sense to our learners. We also need to check whether the main activity has covered any of the main lesson aims or we have to focus on some added materials or tasks for extra practice on some key language features.

References


