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Reading is Essential in Second Language Classes

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Reading -- a Definition

The term “reading” has so many meanings! Some people think that reading is when students look at French and pronounce the French they are looking at. Actually, this is not reading. It is a pronunciation exercise. It does not promote language acquisition. To clarify what I mean by reading, my definition of reading is: Students see a movie in their heads while looking at dark squiggles on paper.

The purpose of including reading activities in a language class is to develop students who read fluently (silently) for pleasure or to gain knowledge.

On the way to becoming a fluent reader, a language student progresses through many stages, uses many techniques, and devotes many hours to the activity we call “reading.” The teacher’s task is to facilitate this progress as expeditiously as possible.

Reading -- the Benefits

In his book, “The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research” (see Resources) Stephen Krashen makes the case for incorporating reading in language classes. Among other benefits, he cites research that shows greater gains in vocabulary, spelling, writing, and grammar from reading than from direct instruction in those skills! So the message is clear: If we want students who have good grammar, who spell well, who write well and with good vocabularies, we are more likely to achieve those goals by spending time in reading than by spending the same amount of time on teaching those skills. Therefore it is appropriate to devote as much class time as possible to reading.

That is why TPR Storytelling® consists of one day of oral practice followed by one day of reading. Most current TPR Storytelling materials are written for such a schedule: Every lesson has two readings that emphasize the structures of the preceding day, while extending vocabulary and developing expanded grammatical competence.

Reading -- Procedures

The most common type of reading in second language classes involves everybody reading the same thing.

TPR Storytelling Reading

TPRS Reading has several purposes: diagnose errors, observe fluency, point out grammar.

TPR Storytelling Reading means that the students translate the reading into their native language. Often the teacher reads a paragraph in L2 and then asks for students to translate. Sometimes the translation is done chorally, other times one student translates the first paragraph and another student translates the next paragraph.

One reason for translation is to assure perfect comprehension. I have witnessed many language classes where students were able to answer Spanish questions about a Spanish reading yet they did not exactly understand the reading! Since language is acquired only when the input is comprehensible, we are not promoting acquisition by simply asking questions in Spanish.

A second reason for translation is to inform the teacher. While listening to a student translate a paragraph, the teacher will discover many interesting things, such as confusing “to” and “from” (this is surprisingly common) or a lack of attention to plurals. As the teacher notices which things tend to be incorrectly translated, the teacher then knows what to reinforce in the next few lessons.

Besides translating the readings, students are asked to notice grammatical features that are pertinent to their level. These “pop-up grammar” items take many forms: How did you know it was “men” and not “man”? What does the “-nt” on that word do? What does “lui” mean? How do you know to say “ate” instead of “eats”? How would you say “he gives her”?

While the teacher listens for fluency and accuracy, it is important to make the student feel successful. This is done by staying a few words ahead of the reader, ready to offer the correct translation of unknown (or forgotten) words.

The two TPR Storytelling readings per lesson are frequently not very interesting and sometimes need to be enhanced in order to maintain student interest. This shortcoming will most likely be overcome in future publications. One way to enhance a dull reading is to develop a “parallel story.” This involves comparing the information in the paragraph to a student in class. It is a good technique for making a lively discussion. A shortcoming of the parallel story is that it can make the reading day much like an oral story day.

TPR Storytelling reading has absolutely no research to prove that it is a valid technique. Many teachers can attest to the improved reading abilities after using translation, but the technique has not been the subject of formal research.

Reading Novels or Readers

It is advisable to select readers or novels that are appealing to students. This is the kind of reading that Stephen Krashen refers to in his book “The Power of Reading.” This is the kind of reading that we can expect to produce improved spelling, grammar, vocabulary, and writing style. Acquisition occurs only when the learner is focused entirely on meaning, not on structure. So if the text is interesting enough to grab their attention, then students may enter the “flow” of reading. It is being in the “flow” that produces acquisition.

If reading a novel in class, the students should simply translate aloud while the teacher maintains the pace and immediately supplies the translation of unfamiliar phrases. The “flow” of the story should not be interrupted. This technique is especially good in the first two years of language study. All discussion of the reading is done in the L2, not in the native language. The discussion should be centered on the thrill of reading, the characters, and the plot (much like a book club discussion.) I used to take ten days (two weeks of class) to read a novel all the way through with no other language lessons. Very quickly, my students began to read the French book aloud (that is they were speaking English while looking at French) at a normal speed! I was stunned at how quickly the good readers in English became fast readers in French!

Sometimes teachers like to put students into groups to have them read together. While personally I did not do this, it could be successful if the book were sufficiently easy for the students. The teacher would have to be very active in monitoring the groups because if they run into things they don't understand they will quickly get off track!

It is important to make sure that students are paying attention to the written page, not just listening to the translation. Asking “what word are we on?” or something similar may be necessary.

In addition to the two readings per lesson of every TPR Storytelling lesson, students should read four novels in level one and four novels in level two.

Independent (homework) reading

In levels three and above, students should all be proficient enough to read independently. After all, they have already read eight novels! Each novel should be introduced as a whole class reading (translating) and once they are reading fluently (usually one or two chapters) the book can be assigned as homework. All discussion should be done in L2, just like in levels 1 and 2. Homework assignments and quizzes based on the readings may be necessary to keep everyone doing the homework.

Non-fiction readings are an important addition to the upper-level classes. As always, discussions should be in the L2. Reading many views of the same event is a good way to promote critical thinking, defending varying points of view, and encouraging more intellectual discourse.

Free Reading

Every classroom needs a reading library. The library should include one-word-per-page baby books all the way through comic books, magazines, newspapers, easy readers, children's lit, and advanced books. A few minutes are set aside for students to browse these reading materials with no requirements other than to read. They should be able to flip through, scan, put away and try another, read something babyish, look at pictures, and just enjoy the experience of self-selected reading.

Of all the topics in this article, Free Reading is the single most-researched activity and the most effective! Free reading is the activity that has been proven to teach vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and style better than teachers do.

Nevertheless, Free Reading is also the one reading activity that many teachers hesitate to try. Think of it, the single most powerful, most effective teaching technique in the world is the one thing teachers resist! For one thing, if students are not held accountable, then teachers feel uneasy. Teachers want students to report on words they learned, list the title of what was read, do something, anything! It is a matter of control. They worry about not being able to manage the classroom without some "stick" that can be held over the students' head.

It is too bad, because Free Reading gives teachers a chance to enjoy a bit recreational L2 reading, it gives students a chance to really fall in love with a book, and it gives students a chance to tell their classmates about really good books. Not only that, but linguistic gains are stupendous. I remember being pleasantly surprised at how willing kids were to just read and how much they loved it. Some teachers do it once or twice a week. One friend of mine gives up the first few minutes of every class for free reading. She says that her students now hurry to get to class early to grab their favorite book and start reading. Even the students in fourth-year Spanish race to her class every day! The strategy of not letting it go on for too many minutes keeps student enthusiasm high.

Kindergarten Day

Language is acoustical. We say what "sounds right" to us. Good readers hear the language in their heads when they read. (Shaywitz) In order to become fluent readers, students need to hear the language. That is why TPR Storytelling lessons are organized with one day of oral skills followed by one day of reading material that reprises the previous day's structures. (That is also why it is a good practice for the teacher to read a paragraph in L2 before the students translate during TPRS Reading.) But simply hearing conversational language and storytelling language is not enough.

Initially, students should listen to the teacher reading children's books, as is done in kindergarten. The teacher reads a page or two, shows the illustrations, and then discusses the picture and the story and connects it to the students. The activity should be engaging, the story familiar, and the tone light-hearted. My students became so enthusiastic about this activity that they arranged to bring milk and cookies, held stuffed animals, and sat on the floor for Kindergarten Day. I always cut it short - never more than 15 minutes, usually only about 10 minutes. Just like Free Reading, I left them yearning for more!

The principle of hearing the language read aloud extends beyond stories, particularly in the upper levels. Students should hear what an educated native speaker sounds like. They should listen to literature, magazine articles, news articles, songs, interviews, a wide variety of voices and accents. Books on CD are a good way for students to get comprehensible input through their eyes and ears at the same time.

Discussion

Reading discussions should be conducted in the L2, of course. There are many procedures for discussing readings that contribute to proficiency. If students are to find the joy that comes from reading, it would be wise to avoid the tedious re-hashing of details that so commonly dominates classroom reading discussions.

Here are a few discussion suggestions:

1. Give a quiz. The quiz can be a simple true-false and the questions can sequentially follow the text. After the quiz, just go over the answers in class and the text will essentially be re-hashed.
2. Personalize the text. This can mean creating a parallel story (which can have the disadvantage of detracting from actual reading if taken too far.) But it can also be a true book discussion if the teacher asks things like, "Has this ever happened to you?" "Do you know anybody like that?" "What would you do in this situation?"
3. Capitalize on the culture. Most readers contain interesting cultural information. Discussing the information is genuinely interesting. It sometimes sparks a desire to do a bit of cultural research.
4. Teach a life lesson. Almost every reading has a plot that involves making choices. How and why characters make choices is a fruitful opportunity for teachers to point out the merits of seeking good information, using good (or bad) judgment, practicing fairness and courtesy, behaving in a mature way, and so forth.
5. Graphic organizers can help a teacher to focus a class discussion. I tend not to like them because they smack of turning a good book into a classroom activity. (Never in my 60+ years of loving stories have I been tempted to use a graphic organizer in order to really savor a book.)
6. Act it out! This is a wonderful way to show students just how much fun a book is. Select the action scenes, get a couple of props and re-read the chapter (or just the cool part of the chapter) while students dramatize the whole scene with joyous,

exaggerated action and melo-drama-style cheering and booing from the “peanut gallery.”

Visualization is important

I discovered that the Special Ed students who had reading difficulties made huge gains in reading after just one year of TPR Storytelling. A reading specialist consulted with me and posited that TPR Storytelling provides V/V-like support for students who have “weak concept imagery.” (see Nanci Bell link in Resources)

Some poor readers lack the ability to visualize what they read. (I always called it “seeing a movie while reading.”) She informed me that this is the key: students act out stories and then the stories are retold while making reference to the location in the room where the action occurred. This teaches them to visualize the action that they saw just minutes ago. When student read the same (or a similar) story the next day, the action they saw connects to the words they are reading. She even went so far as to implement TPR Storytelling practices into a special “D-level” 9th grade English class. At the end of the year, these “D-level” students outscored the whole school on the annual year-end vocabulary test!

Reading is Essential

Of all the things students learn in school, nothing is more important than reading. Of all the activities, drills, games, and explanations language teachers supervise, nothing promotes language acquisition as well as reading. With something as important as reading, it is imperative that reading take center stage in our language classes.

Resources

Krashen, S. 2004. **The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research** (Heinemann 2004)

Trelease, Jim. **The Read-aloud Handbook**. (Penguin, 1995)

Rief, Linda. The Power of Reading: Practices that Work. *View from the Middle* Volume 8, Number 2. December 2000 ©National Council of Teachers of English

Elizabeth K. Knutson. Reading with a Purpose: Communicative Reading Tasks for the Foreign Language Classroom. *Foreign Language Annals* (volume 30, number 1, 1997).

Dr. Sally E. Shaywitz and Dr. Bennett A Shaywitz, Professors of Learning Development at the Yale University School of Medicine and Co-Directors of the Yale Center for Learning. (Apr 3, 2009, Leonard Lopate Show, WNYC)

Nancibell® Visualizing and Verbalizing® Program

<http://www.lindamoodbell.com/programs/visualizing-verbalizing.html>

For lots of reading links, ideas, and titles, go to Jason Fritze's web page
www.comprehensibleinput.com

A list of titles for levels 1 - 4 in German, French, or Spanish is available at:
<http://www.susangrosstprs.com/lessons/index.html>