

From principles to practice in EAP reading

Joe McVeigh looks at ways of helping academic students improve their reading skills.

What is the most important skill for your EAP students? For most, the ability to read well may be the most important second language academic skill. In order for students to be successful in academic classrooms, they need to be able to obtain a great deal of information through reading. EAP students typically need to read a lot and that reading is an important source of input for both language and content (Grabe and Stoller, 2014).

However, many EAP students are frustrated when they attempt to read. Those whose first languages use a different alphabet or writing system may be especially challenged. Students find that the decoding process takes a long time – much too long – and that they are often challenged with new and unfamiliar vocabulary words. Then, just when they think they have things figured out, they discover that they have misinterpreted the meaning of a sentence and haven't got it right at all.

How readers construct meaning

But what exactly do students need to do in order to read? Reading experts agree that fluent readers are able to ascertain the meaning of the text through three different types of mental processing: bottom-up, top-down, and interactive.

Bottom-up processing refers to the action that begins with the text itself. Readers need to decode letters and turn them into sounds in order to make meaning. They learn to identify words and grammatical structures. So a teacher helping students

Bottom-up, top-down or interactive?	
Do the following classroom activities focus on (B) bottom-up, (T) top-down or (I) interactive processing?	T, B or I
1. Engage in schema-building activities to activate background knowledge.	
2. Learn new words before reading.	
3. Study how passive voice is used in a story.	
4. Underline a grammar structure or verb tense.	
5. Read for overall meaning, not stopping for unfamiliar words.	
6. Write a paragraph using information from two different texts.	
Answers [1. T; 2. B; 3. B or I; 4. B.; 5. T; 6. I]	

work on their bottom-up processing skills would focus on teaching new vocabulary, recognising grammatical structures and understanding the way that the text is organised.

Another way of approaching the text is through *top-down processing*. The concept behind top-down processing is that the reader brings their own information to the text and consequently, real understanding or comprehension resides in the reader. The reader uses background knowledge and makes predictions about what they think will come next. So to encourage top-down processing, teachers need to focus on meaning-generating activities (Anderson, 2008).

A third type of processing is known as interactive. By using top-down and bottom-up processes simultaneously, readers work both from the text and from their own understanding to make meaning. These higher- and lower-

level processes influence each other in *interactive processing* (Hedgcock and Ferris, 2009).

As an EAP reading teacher, you want to design activities to develop all of these types of processing in your students. Consider the classroom activities in the table above.

Develop word recognition skills

When working on EAP reading skills, we may sometimes assume that students are already at a reasonable level of proficiency and choose to move away from developing those bottom-up processing skills described above. But there are few abilities more useful to students than being able to look at a word, recognise it instantly and comprehend the meaning. As Day (2013) notes: 'Fluent reading involves *automaticity*, when something is done automatically: quickly, rapidly, and without thinking. A critical

component of reading fluency involves the automatic recognition of words ...'.

We can help students develop their sight vocabulary – that is, the vocabulary words that they recognise instantly – by engaging them in what Grabe and Stoller (2014) refer to as *word- and phrase- recognition exercises* or *timed word-selection exercises*. To create these exercises, make a chart with the target word in the left-hand column. Across the page, put five other words, one of which is the target word and the other four of which are distractors: similar, but not quite the same. Make a page of these activities, then have students see how quickly they can read across each line and recognise the target word. This same activity can be done with short phrases, as well.

Move from sentence-level to discourse-level processing

At a low-intermediate level, students are beginning to understand how sentences work grammatically. It is time to help students understand how texts are organised at a discourse level. What should they expect at the beginning, middle and end of a reading passage? Can they recognise transitions that connect to existing ideas or that change the subject to a new topic? Often there are clues in the text itself.

A classic method for developing discourse-level processing is the *strip story*. Take a paragraph or two of an existing reading passage and type it out in individual sentences. Cut up each sentence so it is on a separate piece of paper. Mix up the sentences and give them to the students. Can they reconstruct the original passage using the discourse cues?

Develop lessons structured around pre-, during- and post-reading activities

In the classroom, many teachers focus on comprehension questions after students have completed a reading passage. That is, at least in part, because such questions are easy for teachers to write and it is also easy to tell if students are getting the right answer. However, to fully develop students' skills, you should develop lessons with *pre-, during- and post-reading activities*. In other words, you don't just want to focus on what happens after students have read, you want to include activities for before, during and after reading.

Common pre-reading activities include activating schema, previewing the text, prediction and vocabulary activities. Remember the idea of *top-down processing*? That was the idea that readers bring their own ideas to the reading. Part of what readers bring is

background knowledge, also known as schema. If you help students realise what they already know about a subject prior to reading, this can help in their comprehension. You can also ask students to look quickly through a text to preview it, just focusing on headings, initial sentences or photo captions. This should give them a good idea of what to expect during the reading.

You should also give students tasks to complete while they are reading through the passage. You might, for instance, introduce an important question before they read and ask them to keep it in mind while they are reading. You might ask them to look for specific details as they are reading.

For intensive EAP texts, you will also want to include post-reading activities. In addition to basic questions about content and comprehension, take the discussion to the next level by asking students to perform a critical analysis and evaluation. You might ask, for example, 'In which lines of the reading does the author give factual information? In which lines does the author give their opinion? What clues tell you it is their opinion?' Depending on your course content, there may also be room for activities promoting students' reflection on and integration of the content. In these activities students might be asked whether they agree with an author's point of view and asked to justify their opinion. You can follow up with a writing task in which students give their own ideas about the topic and use quotations from the text to support their ideas.

Use both intensive and extensive reading

EAP reading courses typically focus on close reading of academic texts. Teachers and students engage in a careful review of vocabulary words, take part in pre-reading activities, then read the passage and afterwards answer a variety of comprehension questions. This is as it should be. However, simply reading closely and *intensively* is not enough. Studies have shown that to really improve reading ability, students



need to read a great deal of material. Most EAP texts do not lend themselves to rapid reading.

To truly develop as readers, students need not only intensive, but also *extensive reading*. In an ideal extensive reading programme, your school provides students with reading materials that are of high interest, and that students can read without difficulty. You might think that students can't make progress unless they are working on something that is a little too hard for them, but this is not the case with extensive reading. You want students to read as much as possible, and outside the classroom as well as inside. The students get to choose what they read. If a book isn't interesting, they can choose something else. Encourage them not to stop and look up words and not to use a dictionary. If there are too many unfamiliar words, students should choose easier material. For purposes of building fluency, it is not important that students read material related to academic subject matter. Graded readers of fictional material, popular magazines, even comic books or graphic novels can all develop students' reading ability and this ability will transfer into their ability to read academic material (Day and Bamford, 1998).

Increase students' reading speed

Readers at all levels can always work on developing their reading fluency by learning to read more quickly and accurately. However, most of us don't get faster without practice and sometimes a little push. For example, if you've been involved in sports such as running or swimming, you know that to become faster you need to make yourself move a little faster than may be comfortable. Just as sports coaches encourage athletes to give more effort, teachers need to push students to read faster to develop fluency and automaticity.

The best way to do this is through timed readings. Give students a text that is not too difficult. It can even be one that they have read before. Using a timer,

ask them to read for a specified period, say two to three minutes. Tell them to read at the fastest rate they can while still comprehending the material. Have them mark their place at the end of the time. Then go back to the beginning of the reading and ask them to repeat the activity, reading a little faster. At the end of the same time period, they should have read more than the first time. Repeat one more time, encouraging students to take risks by reading faster than is comfortable. They may wish to pace themselves by using a finger, a pencil or a sheet of paper as they move down the page. This should result in greater confidence in reading faster and the knowledge that they can, in fact, read faster than they thought.

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Explicitly teach strategies

Finally, be sure to explicitly teach reading strategies to your students. Strategies are simply defined as 'processes that are consciously controlled by readers to solve reading problems' (Grabe, 2009: 221). Some useful strategies to teach are the ability to skim a text quickly to get the gist or general idea of the content, and to scan the text in order to find specific information.

Students can also be helped by being encouraged to monitor their own comprehension as they read. Highlighting the text, underlining or note-taking are useful strategies for this purpose. You can also help students focus on monitoring comprehension by asking them to complete a task while they read, such as filling in a simple graphic organiser, or chart in which they outline key parts of the text.

Summary

Teaching EAP reading can be challenging – but also rewarding. Keep the interest level high, and encourage your students to keep at it. They'll benefit from your instruction and you'll feel a great sense of satisfaction when you see them succeed.

References

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