

**MELTA SEMINAR BY ALAN MOORE  
TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION: METHODS AND MATERIALS FOR UPPER SECONDARY  
SCHOOLS**

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The seminar was held at the British Council on the 15th of June at 8.00 a.m. It was attended by about 50 participants from all over Selangor.

Alan Moore began by describing the traditional comprehension lesson usually carried out in a classroom.

Steps:

- 1 Pre-reading exercises or 'set induction';
- 2 Dealing with 'difficult' vocabulary;
- 3 Key questions to elicit main points;
- 4 Teacher's explanation;
- 5 Variety of question forms (open-ended, multiple-choice, yes-no, true-false).

This type of lesson has its strengths because obviously some of the students are learning some things, for example, the meanings of words as shown in the context. Implications in the text can also be brought out by the teacher through inferential questions which allow the students to see the structure of the text and to understand it. Also the whole lesson is a training for the examination. However, it must be remembered that it is a reading comprehension lesson and not a listening comprehension lesson.

**What then is reading?**

It is a 'psycholinguistic guessing game'. The emphasis is on meaning and fact. The reader is entering into a dialogue with the writer through the text. The reader is not just passively listening but actively building up some picture. There is some kind of expectation and the reader's background knowledge is activated even before he completes the text. He sets up certain hypotheses as he goes on reading and adopts a questioning attitude towards the text. This is the key point which the teacher can exploit in a comprehension lesson, that is, to train the student to ask questions.

When the teacher asks questions as in a traditional comprehension lesson, is she teaching or testing? Teaching is helping people to learn. Testing is finding out what they know and don't know. Focusing on the 'right' answers means

the teacher is not actually teaching. The student is trying to guess what is in the teacher's mind and give the kind of answer the teacher wants. The lesson becomes one of pleasing the teacher rather than of understanding the text. If the student gives a 'possible' answer, it is often rejected because it is not absolutely 'right' or 'correct'.

The other weaknesses of the traditional comprehension lesson are:

- 1 The text is not tuned in to possible interpretations;
- 2 The teacher monopolizes the talking time and often, if no answers are given by the students, she may answer questions herself.
- 3 The student has no opportunity to guess or work out meanings for himself.
- 4 When the student is asked to read aloud, it is difficult to focus on meaning at the same time.
- 5 Finally, the major criticism is the student has no chance to ask questions.

At this point, one of the participants pointed out that what is really important is preparing the student for the examination. Mr Moore did not deny that preparation for an examination is important but the teacher should not devote the whole year to it. Some of the things we could do during a reading comprehension lesson but don't do, actually help the student. This training to question will activate the student. It is important that the text chosen should be suitable for the student. We should, as language teachers, give students texts they can handle.

To demonstrate the point that asking questions activates the student's thinking there was group discussion. Each group had to formulate questions both literal and inferential on a given passage. This resulted in lively discussion. Mr Moore made an interesting point when he said: 'Instead of judging students according to the answers they give, judge them according to the questions they ask. Encourage them to have a questioning attitude and this will result in interesting sessions with active students who are not afraid.'

At this juncture tea was served and there was a 15 minute break. After tea, Mr Moore began by describing several techniques which teachers could try out with their classes. They all require close reading of the text by the students and in nearly all cases, group work of some kind. Group work drastically reduces the amount of teacher talk and gives students the chance to say more themselves and thus to become more active learners.

### **Alternative methods for teaching reading comprehension**

#### *1. Group Multiple-Choice*

Most of our textbooks contain reading passages followed by multiple-choice questions. Usually there are four choices, and of these, one is correct and two may be ridiculous. So it really falls to a dual-choice. The text writer in this case is directing your line of thinking. To overcome this, Mr Moore suggests converting multiple-choice questions into a group activity. Students answer the questions individually and then compare their answers within their group. Where there are discrepancies they argue for or against their choice, but the group must come up with one answer only. Finally, the groups give their answers to the teacher.

This is a good way of converting a typical teacher-dominated lesson, where students get minimal chance of speaking, into one where they get the opportunity to read, compare, discuss and argue for or against.

#### *2. Group Cloze*

This is again a group exercise and it is easy for the teacher to prepare. Choose a passage and decide where to put the blanks. The group discussion which comes after each student has tried to fill in the blanks himself, gives the weak student the chance to speak and to learn from his classmates. His knowledge of the rules of the language and vocabulary is bound to increase.

The teacher could, together with the cloze, provide a glossary of words (English and Bahasa Malaysia) with meanings or with an initial letter and a dash for each subsequent letter in the word. The idea is to help the student to successfully complete the exercise which will then give him a sense of achievement.

#### *3. Group Multiple-Choice Cloze*

A passage is chosen but instead of deleting every Nth word, three more words of the same grammatical category are added. The original word is inserted, amongst the other three and the student's task, and then the group's, is to select the correct one according to the meaning of the text.

#### *4. Group Prediction*

This is an interesting and enjoyable technique as it attempts to capitalize on the hypothesizing process which goes on in the reader's mind as he is reading the text. Students are asked to guess what will happen next in a short story on the limited evidence of short extracts. As more and more bits of the story are given to them, they obviously build up a more complete picture. The justification for such exercises is that they train the student to make intelligent guesses on the basis of limited evidence and also sensitize him to the active, questioning nature of the reading process.

#### *5. Group Sequencing*

In this exercise a text is chopped up into paragraphs jumbled up and the student has to put them back in the right order. To do this the student needs to be aware of the relations between sentences, special discourse markers, signpost words and cohesive devices of the writer. The puzzle-like quality of the exercise will appeal to the students.

#### *6. Group Matching*

There are several possibilities here. The student can match:

- (a) texts with pictures;
- (b) texts with headlines;
- (c) texts with questions and answers.

With the aid of the OHP Mr Moore showed the participants the possibilities. For the student this is also a useful scanning exercise for often he doesn't need to read the whole text.

#### *7. Group SQ3R*

The S stands for Survey, Q for Question and the 3R for Reading, Reciting and Recall or Review. This is a technique to help students get the most out of the textbooks they have to study. SQ3R helps students acquire better study habits. The procedure might go something like this:

- (a) Give out the title, headline or any accompanying pictures. Each group discusses

- what they think the article will be about. Then discuss it with the whole class.
- Give out the first sentence of the text. Then proceed as above.
  - Give out the last sentence or paragraph. Continue as before with group and class discussion.
  - Get each group to jot down all the questions that come into their heads which they want to see answered by the text.

All this activity involves marshalling one's previous knowledge of the subject, setting up anticipation in the mind and adopting a questioning attitude towards the text. The next three steps are optional:

- Students read the whole text and see how far

- they were right in their predictions.
- Students can now 'recite' the main points and this kind of oral summary is an extremely valuable oral exercise.
  - At a later date, you can ask various students what a particular text was about.

These then were the approaches described and discussed. The emphasis was on group activity as this would generate student participation. An important point is these techniques will not work unless the text meets the level of the students. It is good to remember Mr Moore's quotation of J.S. Bruner: 'You only like what you're good at'. For the participants, it was a fruitful Saturday. The seminar ended at 12.45 p.m.



## **JUST SITTING AROUND?**



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