

I suppose we are all familiar with the following type of reading lesson. We choose a text, we get students to read it, and then we ask them questions on it to see whether they've understood. Sometimes we help them by explaining some of the new vocabulary. Or we try to guide our students to 'unlock' the meanings of the text by themselves, by asking 'prompting' questions, or by eliciting from them information which can guide them to the correct meaning of a sentence or 'chunk'. Often we try to get them to deduce the meaning of individual words instead of just telling them.

There's nothing wrong with all this. In fact, it's all perfectly sound. After all, the question and answer method is probably one of the most fruitful of all language teaching techniques, especially if we can get the students to do a lot of the talking, that is answering and asking the questions.

However, if we rely on this method to the exclusion of all others, we run the risk of being rather dull and stereotyped, and of denying our students the chance to learn in other ways which might be more interesting to them as learners. One problem with the above method is that the student is rather passive. What he doesn't understand is explained by the teacher. The teacher does most of the talking so that the lesson become more of a listening comprehension one than a reading lesson as such. Which reminds me of a rather silly riddle I made up recently:

**QUESTION:** When is a reading lesson a reading lesson?

**ANSWER:** When students read.

I would like to describe several techniques which teachers could try out with their classes. They all require close reading of a text (by the students!), and, in nearly all cases, group work of some kind. Group work drastically reduces the amount of teacher talk, and thus gives students the chance to say more themselves, and to become more active learners.

## 1 Group Multiple-Choice

Most of our textbooks contain reading passages followed by multiple-choice questions. These exercises are much more interesting for the students, and much more effective in terms of amount of language being practised, if they are converted into a **group** activity. Students read and talk. The teacher goes from group to group, taking part in the discussions, asking leading questions and generally helping students to learn.

Here is a typical lesson format for dealing with texts followed by M/C questions:

Step 1: The teacher divides the class into groups of four. A group leader is appointed.

Step 2: Each student within the groups reads the text (silently!) and answers the questions, keeping a record of his answers.

Step 3: Each group now has to come up with a group answer. This will involve the students comparing their answers with each other and, where there are discrepancies, trying to argue for or against their choices. But the group must come up with one answer only.

Step 4: The teacher now asks each group to give their answers for each question. These can be recorded on the chalkboard like this:

Question	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4 etc.
1	A	A	C	A
2	B	B	B	B
3	A	D	A	D

Step 5: Where there are differences, as in Questions 1 and 3 above, the groups have to justify their answers. In Question 1, for example, Group 3 would have to justify their choice of C, and Group 1, say, their choice of A.

Of course, it may be that C is correct in which case all the other groups have to say why they chose A. The teacher should not say which one he thinks is correct until all the discussion is over.

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

## 2 Group Cloze

Cloze tests are now part of the new 122 exam format. One thing (and not the only one of course!) which makes Cloze such an attractive reading exercise is that it is so easy to construct. Choose a passage from a newspaper, magazine or book, decide where to put the blanks, every sixth, seventh or eighth word or whatever, and there you are with a good piece of teaching material.

The same technique which was used for GROUP MULTIPLE CHOICE can be used here:

In Step 4, instead of writing the letters of the M/C alternatives on the chalkboard, you write the words chosen by each group. All the other steps are the same.

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 colleagues. His knowledge of the rules of language and of vocabulary is bound to increase. Also the puzzle-like nature of the exercise is very motivating

## 3 Group Multiple-Choice Cloze

To prepare an exercise of this type you choose a text and either select every Nth word or any other set of words according to your own criterion. But now, instead of deleting that particular word, you **add** three more words of the same grammatical category. You then insert the original

word in amongst the other three somewhere. The student's task, and then the group's, is to select the correct one according to the meaning of the text.

Here is an example for **you** to try. This particular text is fairly difficult and is not meant for your students, although no doubt some of them could do it. You can prepare exercises of your own based on this model.

It is not difficult to make reading impossible. I am not referring to such obvious means as distracting the 1. (viewer, reader, listener, hearer), tearing out 2. (books, covers, magazines, pages), defacing the print, switching off the 3. (lights, pages, electricity, television), or even the writing of books in a 4. (sad, uneven, dull, exciting) and incomprehensible manner, although a book that does not 5. (bring, cause, help, make) sense will certainly be 6. (easy, unfathomable, enjoyable, difficult) to read. I 7. (mean, beg, state, deny) that it is easy to make a book unreadable for a person who 8. (nevertheless, surprisingly, else, otherwise) would be able to pick up that 9. (even, other, same, different) book and read it fluently. One very 10. (effective, ridiculous, hopeless, fair) way to produce incomprehension 11. (are, is, will be, has been) to ensure that the 12. (person, woman, spokesman, reader) trying to read the 13. (article, interview, material, book) is apprehensive about making 14. (few, any, a, many) mistake, for example while 15. (saying, decoding, encoding, reading) aloud. Reading is not 16. (very, easily, so, highly) accomplished if you are 17. (nervous, sensitive, ill, tired) about your performance. Equally 18. (disturbing, frightful, disgusting, handicapping) can be the endeavour 19. (for, to, in, we) memorize every trivial detail 20. (in, on, to, by) order to avoid being 21. (pushed, deceived, ditched, caught) out in a subsequent 22. (act, speech, turn, cross-examination) or written exercise, especially 23. (if, as, how, so) the exercise is to 24. (have been, be graded, will be, not be) and the evaluation 25. (not, to have, is, to) become part of a permanent record that perhaps could make a difference to a career.

#### 4 Group Prediction

When we read we are constantly making guesses about the writer's message, trying to match his ideas with the ones we have in our own brain, struggling to understand on the basis of what we know already. To use a more scientific term than 'guessing', we **hypothesize** about the meaning of the text from the evidence presented to us in the in-marks on the page. We make a hypothesis and then it is either confirmed or rejected as we go further into the text. Reading is, therefore, very much an active process. Although outwardly we may appear to be quiet and passive, our brain is actually working at full capacity.

The reader, then, just like the listener in a conversation, is actively trying to build up a picture in his mind of what the writer is saying. This picture or mental structure is constantly being modified as new evidence presents itself. The reader, probably unconsciously, asks himself questions and then seeks out the answers.

The group prediction exercise attempts to capitalize on this hypothesizing process. 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.

Step 1: The teacher has already chosen a short story, preferably with a twist at the end. He has cut it up into chunks. He divides the class into groups again. Each student gets the first bit of the story and reads it. Then the group has a minute or two to share their impressions.

Step 2: The teacher asks the groups what is happening, who the characters are, what they are doing, and, more importantly, what will happen next and why. Each group may come up with different ideas especially in the early stages.

Step 3: The teacher now gives out the second chunk of the story, and the process is repeated.

Step 4: The cycle of read — discuss in groups — discuss in class goes on until the end of the story is reached.

*Comment:* This exercise promotes an active questioning attitude in the reader and is valuable because of this. It weans the inexperienced reader away from the idea that he does not have to make any effort himself. Each reader will probably ask himself different questions because each reader's previous knowledge of the subject matter of the text and experience of reading in general is different.

#### 5 Group Sequencing

Reading means being able to follow the writer's train of thought. It also means being attentive to the special discourse markers and signpost words used by writers to guide the readers along. Examples of such words and clauses might be: *therefore, firstly, finally, as we mentioned above, if ..., although ...,* etc. Many of these words mark stages in an argument, or refer back to items in previous sentences, or prepare the reader to look ahead. Again, students need to be aware of the relations between sentences, and of the 'cohesive' devices used by writers to make their message more easily understood.

Sequencing exercises fulfil this need. And they are very easy to make up. You take a text, chop it up into paragraphs, jumble them up, and the student has to put them back in the right order. He can only do this by reading the whole text, and understanding the meaning of the different parts. He also has to be on the look-out for signpost words and cohesive devices.

Another possibility is to cut up a paragraph into its constituent sentences. This can be more or less difficult than the whole text exercise depending on the length and nature of the paragraph. Again, the puzzle-like quality of the exercise will make it appeal to students.

Here is an example of the second type:

- 1 Police have detained an 18-year-old youth in connection with the case.
- 2 All the same, his curiosity got the better of him and it prompted him to ask the boy where he had got the chicken from.
3. Meanwhile, in Maran, a bachelor, Mat Desa, 23, reported that his three hens and cockerel were stolen from the chicken coop near his house in Kampung Bintang on Sunday.
4. Ringlet chicken farmer Tang Yuet Ming had no idea that the fowl which a youth tucked under his arm belonged to him.
- 5 Without wasting any time, Tang caught hold of the boy, chicken and all, and marched to the nearest police station.
- 6 Unhesitatingly, the boy replied: 'I stole it from your farm.'

The correct order of these sentences is:....

## 6 Group Matching

This is another game-like activity which requires the student to read a text, or part of one, in order to complete the activity successfully.

Matching means putting together two things which have some common factor. There are several possibilities:

1 *Texts and pictures.* Scour through magazines and newspapers for articles accompanied by photographs or pictures. Select about six examples. You can choose different themes or similar ones if you want to make the exercise more difficult.

Cut out the six texts and six pictures, shuffle them up, and then give each text a number and each picture a letter. The student's job is to match the right text with the right picture.

When each student has done this he can compare his result with the other members of the group.

2 *Texts and headlines.* Use the same procedure as before. Some headlines are better than others in that they are ambiguous, humorous or not

obvious at first sight. Others merely lift the first sentence of the report. In this case, the student would not have to read much of the text in order to be able to do the matching. So try to choose texts with less literal headlines.

3 *Texts with questions and answers.* Sometimes you find interviews printed verbatim in magazines and newspapers. These are ideal for matching exercises. Or you could use the advice columns, 'My wife has run away with another man, what shall I do?' or 'How can I cure back-ache?' Provided more than one problem is discussed, you have, potentially, very interesting matching exercises just waiting to be used.

Here is an example taken from one of the local newspapers.

Match each question with its answer.

## 10 MOST COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR DREAMS

- 1 Q: Can dreams be influenced by something outside of us as we sleep?
  - 2 Q: Does an infant dream?
  - 3 Q: Do sleeping pills cut down on dream time?
  - 4 Q: Why can't some people remember their dreams?
  - 5 Q: Do dreams repeat themselves?
  - 6 Q: Is it possible to have a repetitive dream set in a spot the dreamer has never been?
  - 7 Q: How long after falling asleep does a person begin to dream?
  - 8 Q: Do blind people dream?
  - 9 Q: Do we dream in colour?
  - 10 Q: Is it possible to get tired from dreaming too much?
- (a) A: Yes. We don't remember colour as often as it occurs because it tends to fade from conscious memory rapidly. But tests have proved that people frequently dream in colour. And the more creative a person, the more he tends to dream in colour.

- (b) A: Dreams do certain psychological work and when their job is done, there usually is no need to remember them. But you can train yourself to remember your dreams by giving yourself instructions before you go to sleep to recall them the next morning.
- (c) A: Yes, people who have suffered intensely are likely to have repetitive dreams as are people who have enjoyed life to the full. When a traumatic dream repeats itself, it is generally an attempt by the dreamer to master or conquer the situation. A pleasant dream may be an attempt to recapture happiness. While the repeated dream may not be the same story, essentially the same theme, object or person will reappear.
- (d) A: Yes, people totally blind from birth dream, but not usually. They dream of sounds and of touching or smelling something. People who once had sight retain their ability to dream visually. Deaf people have visual dreams without sounds in them.
- (e) A: Sometimes. People with vivid imaginations and introverted people who are preoccupied with their own thoughts, feelings and emotions, tend to have a less restful sleep than an outgoing person.
- (f) A: Yes. Common sleeping pills and tranquilizers deprive a person of dream time. However, when the medication wears off, dreaming resumes. This period of deprivation can cause anxiety.
- (g) A: Yes. Most dreams take place in unfamiliar surroundings. But you can't have a dream outside the stretch of your own imagination or experience.
- (h) A: Yes. Dreaming occurs sometime in the third or fourth month after birth. But researchers also have been able to detect similar brain-wave activity in an infant in the womb. Scientists think the embryo's ability to dream is similar to blind people's.
- (i) A: The first dream comes after 90 minutes after going into a deep sleep. Then the dream periods become increasingly longer, but the length of each dream varies. About 20 per cent of our sleep time is spent in the dream state. A sleeper's eyes rapidly moving under his eyelids indicate he is dreaming.
- (j) A: Yes. If a sleeper is touched, hears a sound or smells something, he is likely to weave the disturbance into his dream.

## 7 Group SQ3R

1 This is a technique which was originally developed to help students get the most out of the textbooks they have to study. Many students, without training, do not know how to tackle a book. Some start reading at page 1 and go right through it religiously till the last page. Some read it very slowly, making copious notes as they go along. Others spend a whole term reading just one book.

SQ3R helps the student acquire better study habits. It shows him how to tackle a textbook in the most efficient way.

2 *S stands for Survey.* Before you start reading, you should look at the title, the back cover, the introduction, the table of contents and the index. You should also look at the ends of each chapter. Is there a summary of the main ideas there? Are there any headings in the chapters? You should then read the last page of the book, and after that the first and last paragraphs of all the chapters.

Now ask yourself, 'Is the book worth reading?'

*Q = Question.* If you have decided that the book is worth reading, or that a certain chapter of it is, make up your mind where to start. Flip through the pages of the chapter you have chosen, and jot down on paper some of the questions that come into your head, which you think the text will answer for you.

*R1 = Read.* Read once right through. Read again those bits you didn't understand very well.

*R2 = Recite.* When you've finished the chapter, say aloud what the chapter was all about. Get used to reconstructing aloud the main points of the text. When we are able to tell someone else the main points of what we've read, only then can we say that we have really assimilated them. It may be necessary to go back to the text several times before you can remember the main points well enough.

*R3 = Recall.* In order for you to remember the contents of a chapter, article, book or lecture, you will have to go back to it periodically. Recite again the main points. Refer back to the original if you have forgotten anything or if you are not satisfied with your performance.

3 This technique is obviously a very useful one for students to adopt. We can train them in its use by adopting it ourselves as a teaching technique. Although it would be a good idea to use whole books from time to time, this may not be possible in practice because of the lack of multiple copies of the same book. Instead we can use magazine or newspaper articles.

4 The procedure might go something like this:

Step 1: 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.

Step 2: Give out the first sentence of the text. Then proceed as above.

Step 3: Give out the last sentence or paragraph. Continue as before with group and class discussion.

Step 4: Now 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 reader may now know so much about the text (without having read more than just a few lines of it) that he may decide it is unnecessary to pursue this particular text any further.

5 The next three steps are optional. If the article is an interesting one in its own right, the students might like to read it. In fact they may even ask to read it now that their appetite has been whetted. And since Step 6 is an extremely fruitful exercise in terms of oral production, you might certainly want on occasion to complete the whole lesson plan. It really depends on you and how you would like to train your students.

Step 5: Students read the whole text and see how far they were right in their predictions about the contents.

Step 6: Students can now 'recite' the main points of the text. In actual fact, this kind of oral summary is an extremely valuable oral exercise. Forcing yourself to reconstruct what someone else has said or written helps you to fix the linguistic forms in your mind, as well as the ideas.

Step 7: At a later date you can ask various students what a particular text was about.

6 SQ3R is an extremely useful study and teaching technique which should help the student become more efficient in his study methods. Also, since he is operating in English, his command of the language, and confidence in using it, will automatically expand too. Altogether, a technique worth experimenting and persevering with.

8 All that remains to be said is that I hope that teachers will give some of the techniques described above a try. Students certainly feel involved when they do them. Variety of approach can also cut down on the boredom factor. After all, the more techniques a teacher has tucked up his sleeve, the more entertaining his teaching will become.