3 Principles for Teaching Reading
by Joe McVeigh

Teaser: How can you help your students improve their reading skills? Joe McVeigh offers three solid principles for teaching reading and gives suggestions on how to implement each with your students.

Reading is a skill that every student needs. As teachers, we work to improve our students' reading skills during the year. Here are three principles to aid you as you try to help your students become better readers.

Develop Reading Lessons in Three Parts

When we think of teaching reading, we often concentrate on the actual act of reading. How long will it take students to read the assignment? How well are they comprehending what they read? This is what goes on *during* the reading process. But informed teachers think beyond the *during* stage to set their students up for success. They put together reading lessons in three parts so as to focus on *pre-*, *during-*, and *postreading activities.*

Prereading Activities

Develop *prereading activities* to prepare your students for the reading process. This sounds like a basic idea but, in fact, this is the step that is most commonly skipped by teachers even though research has shown that it has the most positive effect on comprehension. Before your students begin reading, introduce some *schema-building* activities. *Schema* means the framework or context of knowledge that a person brings to a new idea or experience.

For example, if you have grown up in a cold climate, you probably have a very different understanding of snow and winter than a person who was raised in a warm climate. Take some time at the beginning of the lesson to help students realize what they already know about the reading topic, especially if the subject matter is unfamiliar to students.

Some prereading tasks include:

- *Discussion questions:* You can also raise students' awareness of what they are about to read by posing questions for them to discuss before reading.
- *Vocabulary:* Depending on your views about vocabulary learning, you might want to preteach unfamiliar vocabulary words to students before beginning the reading.
- *Skimming:* Ask students to preview the reading by skimming the text quickly, just reading headlines or the topic sentences of paragraphs. You can discuss with students when this type of previewing is especially useful.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that prereading activities are just for beginning level students. It's an important step for advanced students as well—you just need to adjust the task and the demands to meet their language levels.

During-Reading Activities

While students are reading, you can also ask them to take part in *during-reading activities*. These might include keeping an important question in mind as they read. You can also ask students to re-read the text to find specific details or to underline or take notes as they read. The idea is get students to read actively and to engage with the text. Select a task that will require them to think as they read, not just skim over the words.

Postreading Activities
After students have read the passage, you can engage them in *postreading activities.* Many reading textbooks make use of comprehension questions at this point. Although basic comprehension is important, in the postreading activities you should move students into critical thinking tasks. For example:

- Ask students to analyze a text critically and evaluate it.
- Ask students to consider in which lines of the text the author gives factual information, as opposed to just giving his or her own opinion.
- Call on students to point out any particular signal words that indicate fact or opinion.

If you are teaching reading along with speaking or writing, postreading activities may include reflecting on the reading and integrating it with writing or speaking through essays or brief presentations.

Explicitly Teach Reading Strategies

Reading experts agree that one of the best ways to help students in their reading is to explicitly teach reading strategies (Grabe, 2009). Strategies are "conscious actions that readers take to improve their reading skills" (Anderson, 2008, p. 10). You're already familiar with many of these. Some strategies to try out:

- Build activities to encourage your students to skim quickly through a text, just to get the gist or to scan the text for specific information.
- Encourage your students to underline or highlight key words, phrases, and ideas.
- Teach them how to take notes or use graphic organizers to sort out their ideas.

All of these strategies help students not only to comprehend the text in front of them, but to become better readers.

Some students may be reluctant to employ strategies because they just want to grasp the meaning of the text and answer the questions that follow. And as teachers, we sometimes rush through the reading strategies on automatic pilot so that we don't realize the importance of really teaching strategies explicitly. But if you can encourage those students to make use of strategies, they'll find that they are able to grasp the meaning of a text even more effectively. Beyond that, they will form useful habits that can be used in other school subjects and in work settings.

Strategies can be taught at almost any level of reading, though Anderson (2008) cautions against overwhelming beginning level students with too many at once. Still, almost any level student can learn to make predictions, ask questions, or activate prior knowledge before beginning to read.

Strategies are just as important at higher levels, but here you may be focused on more sophisticated strategies, such as assessing the trustworthiness of a narrator.

Help Students Develop Vocabulary Skills

Vocabulary plays an enormously important role in reading (Nation, 2001) and a lack of vocabulary stands between many readers and the ability to read faster and comprehend more. So, of course, we want our students to learn more vocabulary words. But not all vocabulary words are created equal! Research figures show that the 2,000 most commonly used words account for about 80% of all the words that students will encounter in a text. For academic reading purposes, words found on the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2006) will account for another ten percent. So it makes sense to concentrate vocabulary practice on the most commonly taught words.

We can help students expand their vocabulary by raising their awareness of *word families*. Word families are groups of words that share a common base to which different prefixes and suffixes can be added that either change the part of speech or the meaning. The teacher's job is to help students recognize that the same root word may exist in different forms. For instance, the noun *nature* becomes the adjective *natural* when the suffix *–al* is added. It's helpful for teachers to learn the most commonly used forms. A useful list of these is found in Coxhead's Academic Word List. We can likewise expand our students' knowledge of vocabulary by focusing on *synonyms* and *antonyms*.

Most students are aware that paper or electronic dictionaries are potentially important tools—your job is getting them to use them effectively to help expand their vocabularies! Learning correct pronunciation and spelling, along with the multiple meanings that some words have is an effective way of helping students expand their vocabulary as well as improve their reading.

Conclusion

We all want our students to be better readers and to encourage them to succeed. Use these three principles to guide your reading classes to get the school year off to a good start. Good luck!

References

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