



# TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

## Teaching Tips for Developing Reading Skills

by [Emma Tudor](#)

Reading theories for English as a second language (ESL) learning have developed over the years from bottom-up processing, which focused on decoding specific language used in a text including letters, words, and grammatical structures. Later, theories moved to the cognitive view, which enhanced the role of background knowledge in addition to what appeared in the text (top-down processing), including predicting, skimming, and scanning techniques, which I outline in the following section. Most recently, theories focus on the metacognitive view, which is based on the control and manipulation that a reader can have on the act of comprehending a text (Thornbury, 2006). Developing these skills can help ESL learners be more flexible readers, allowing them to read according to their purpose, getting the information they need quickly.

## Reading Skills

### Predicting

Prediction is a prereading activity in which readers try to guess what they are going to read. This helps activate their schemata, or the assumptions we make on the world from what we have already experienced and how our minds organize these assumptions and experiences. Schemata are triggered by names and words and can help readers predict what the author will say in a text, particularly if the reader and author share common presuppositions (Petty, 2009). These previous experiences and assumptions can be used to resolve difficulties and help readers make sense of the sentences, which can help with better comprehension of texts.

### Skimming

Skimming is when a reader reads the text quickly and superficially to get a general idea of the meaning and is a common skill used when reading newspapers, messages and emails. Readers use their discourse knowledge of how different texts are organized, as well as their schemata, to help understand the text. Skimming focuses more importance on understanding the meaning of the whole text rather than structures or items in the text. If a word is not understood, readers can guess the meaning from overall context (Scrivener, 2005); in most instances, it's not necessary to understand every word to get the gist.

## Scanning

Scanning involves reading a text in search of specific information, ignoring everything else (Thornbury, 2006). This skill is often used to locate a specific piece of information quickly from a great deal of information. It is useful for finding dates, names, specific facts, and statistics. Scanning involves your eyes running rapidly over several lines of print simultaneously while keeping the target key words in mind.

## Teaching Tips for Developing Reading Skills

### 1. Practice Makes Perfect!

According to Glendinning and Holmstrom (2004), teachers can help make learners' predictions more accurate. Learners may have little practice at making predictions, lack confidence in contributing their thoughts, and often may predict the wrong meaning, so it is important to provide practice opportunity in the classroom.

#### *Teaching Suggestions*

- **Speculation Activity:** Use speculation activities, in which learners look at pictures of people in different situations and make predictions about what has happened to the person.
- **Peer Predictions:** Use activities in which learners make predictions about their peers, using provided questions. Then, have students ask their peers the questions and compare with their previous predictions. Learners can give reasons for their predictions to help develop their thinking.

### 2. Choose Appropriate Materials

As schemata are different for each individual, there may be a mismatch between that of the reader and of the author, making texts too difficult to make predictions about. Learners in an ESL classroom often come from very different cultures and societies, so they will have different presuppositions, in addition to differences in language, script, opinions, beliefs, values, and assumptions. It is therefore vital to choose materials with topics and themes that learners can relate to.

#### *Teaching Suggestions*

- **Needs Analysis:** Find out about your learners at the start of the course through a needs analysis questionnaire. Throughout the course, take note of the material and topics that learners have responded well to and use this to inform future lesson planning.
- **Strategically Group Students:** Group or pair learners of varying backgrounds when doing activities so they can share their schematic knowledge.
- **Use Authentic Material:** Bring in authentic and current material, such as newspapers, timetables, or leaflets, which are intended to be objective and rely less on presuppositions.

### 3. Emphasize the Importance of Gist

Every time learners check a word's meaning, they interrupt their reading and thinking. Nuttall (2000) believes that learners should be discouraged from using dictionaries because the usual tendency is to use them far too often.

#### *Teaching Suggestions*

- **Limit Dictionaries:** Limit the use of dictionaries to only five words per text so learners have to decide which words are priorities to understanding the text. This develops learner skill in recognizing which words are important for meaning and that some definitions are not necessary to know, and it also keeps learners focused on obtaining the gist.
- **Word Replacement Activity:** Replace some words in a text with nonsense words (e.g., *heb, snud, drit*) and ask learners to answer comprehension questions about the gist. Ensure that the nonsense words do not interfere with meaning of the text, which will demonstrate to learners they do not need to focus on or understand every word to comprehend a text.

### 4. Demonstrate Comprehension Variety

How much of a text needs to be understood (often depending on the genre of text and purpose of reading) and measurement of whether this level of understanding has been achieved proves to be difficult (Nuttall, 2000).

#### *Teaching Suggestions*

- **Genre Practice:** Different genres of text require different levels of understanding. Providing examples of a variety of different tasks can help demonstrate that. Show learners how different it is to find a correct answer when needing to scan a train timetable in comparison to reading a poem. A correct answer can be found easily from a timetable, but this is very different from comprehending a poem, where the text as a whole conveys the meaning (and that meaning is often subjective). By exposing learners to a variety of text genres and raising awareness of these skills, they can consciously practice using them during reading activities, developing their ability.
- **Jigsaw Texts:** To help learners practice comprehension techniques, try using jigsaw texts. In pairs, learners have two different parts of the same text, with partner A missing information which partner B has. Learners must communicate with their partner to identify correct or incorrect answers, comparing each other's information. This awareness raising and self- and peer correction helps learners recognize what they can or cannot understand from the text.

## 5. Encourage Learner Training

A large part of encouraging learner training is to help learners find out how they read most effectively and encourage reading English outside the classroom. Encouraging learners to take responsibility for learning can help produce more effective and independent readers.

### *Teaching Suggestions*

- **Independent Reading Activities:** Set independent reading tasks as homework for learners, for example reading a newspaper article of their choice. This gives them freedom to choose what they read and trains learners to take responsibility outside of the classroom.
- **Encourage Self-Reflection:** Ask learners to self-reflect on their reading skills, after practicing a variety of different reading tasks (e.g., predicting, skimming, scanning). This will help highlight learners' strengths and development areas, giving them insight into how they can focus their reading strategies to become more effective readers.

## Conclusion

Raising learners' awareness of predicting, skimming, and scanning skills helps break down what it means "to read." Along with giving them the opportunity to practice these skills inside and outside the classroom, this awareness raising will help learners increase their reading comprehension and language acquisition, making them more successful readers.

## References

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