# USING READING ACTIVITIES
# IN DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCES

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**Summary**. The aim of the article is to illustrate the interdependence of reading and vocabulary acquisition with a further consideration of a number of approaches to making classroom reading more communicative, by integrating reading activities with other skills work. It also presents a variety of methods and strategies that encourage students' active participation in reading activities and consequently aid with the development of communicative competences.

**Key words**: vocabulary acquisition, reading stages, pre-reading, while-reading, post-reading, communicative competence.

# UTILIZAREA ACTIVITĂȚILOR DE LECTURĂ
# ÎN DEZVOLTAREA COMPETENȚELOR COMUNICATIVE

**Rezumat**. Scopul articolului este de a ilustra interdependența dintre lectură și achiziția vocabularului și a prezenta o varietate de metode și strategii care au ca scop încurajarea participării active a elevilor în activități de citire pentru a asigura dezvoltarea competențelor comunicative.

**Cuvinte cheie:** achiziția vocabularului, etapele lecturii, prelectură, lectură, postlectură, competența comunicativă.

As a result of my interest in the topic of vocabulary acquisition, which naturally outlined in the first years of my teaching career, and also following a general consensus of opinions that "the development of a rich vocabulary is an important element in the acquisition of a foreign language" [1], I have committed myself to researching the topic in depths. This yielded in my Master's Degree work:" Methodological Survey of Teaching Vocabulary in the 19th - 20th Century TEFL Theory", in which I made a contrastive analysis of the majority of foreign language teaching methods and highlighted the way each of the methods viewed and taught the most important aspects of vocabulary knowledge.

I have subsequently focused on more practical aspects of the issue, and directed my research to how vocabulary work should be woven into the syllabus. I have closely studied various Communicative Language Teaching techniques and strategies to teach vocabulary and clarified the following aspects: selecting, presenting and remembering vocabulary, the role of the context in teaching vocabulary items, and dimensions of vocabulary knowledge, (or what to know a word means).

To substantiate my early interest and to enhance the value of my findings, but also to expand my practical teaching skills, I have decided to narrow the topic of my research. Thus, I confined my attention to:

1) <u>important issues that directly relate to the relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge</u>

in English as a foreign language context, as well as

2) <u>ways to teach reading communicatively.</u>

## On the relationship between reading and vocabulary acquisition

It is widely acknowledged that vocabulary acquisition and reading are mutually interdependent. On the one hand vocabulary plays an indispensable role in reading comprehension, since knowing vocabulary (lexical competence) is a prerequisite component of successful reading [2, 3]. But on the other hand, text comprehension is an excellent source for incidental vocabulary learning, thus making reading a valuable tool in vocabulary acquisition [4].

Undoubtedly, one of the ways of learning vocabulary is by formal instruction in the classroom. Several direct procedures for learning vocabulary, such as the key word method, using word cards, exercises with synonyms, classification of words, creating semantic maps, using definitions, and so on, have produced good results. However, classroom observations have shown that explicit instruction can help learners acquire a limited amount of words a year [5], so that the logical conclusion would be that the big increase in the learners' vocabulary sizes must be a result of other ways of acquiring vocabulary. Nagy & Herman [6] point out that even though explicit vocabulary learning can be effective, we need to take into account the limitations of such instruction as it cannot contribute to considerable increase in learners' vocabulary knowledge. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that the majority of words are acquired through listening and reading.

The above-mentioned interdependence has a potential pedagogical effect from a teaching reading and vocabulary perspective, which has been my interest in the latest years. My attempts to find answers to the questions I posed myself have lead me to a wonderful work of James Milton, *Measuring Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition. (2009)*, which I see as a valuable resource for foreign language teachers, learners, and all those who want to offer an efficient learning pedagogy for foreign language reading and vocabulary acquisition.

Throughout the book Milton offers penetrating insights about the extent to which foreign language learners' vocabulary knowledge may affect their reading comprehension and to what extent reading may affect their vocabulary acquisition.

In a more practical search for efficient ways to improve my teaching skills, I have scrutinized a number of methodological sources, works and sites and have elaborated a list of techniques to successfully teach vocabulary using reading activities. Why reading activities? The answer is evident. In an EFL context, where opportunities for practicing English in daily life may be more limited, one of the main sources of new vocabulary is

reading of English texts. Reading plays a key role in increasing learners' vocabulary. According to the exponents of the Communicative Language Teaching, texts provide a wonderful context which helps to infer the meaning of new words. Thus, the task of the teacher is to teach his students "to use a range of cues, both verbal and non-verbal (e.g., pictures and diagrams) in written text to determine meaning" [7].

During my research I have come across such terms as graded reading, extensive and intensive reading. These have become a mainstay of English classrooms in the UK, the USA, New Zealand and Australia and are making their way into teaching English as a foreign language context. Nonetheless, the aim of the present work is far from making an analysis of the previously mentioned approaches. My purpose is rather to share a number of strategies used by these approaches in dealing with teaching vocabulary items.

**Teaching Reading Communicatively**

Just like teaching methodology, reading theories have had their shifts and transitions. Traditionally, the purpose of learning to read in a language has been to have access to the literature written in that language. In language instruction, reading materials have traditionally been chosen from literary texts that represent "higher" forms of culture.

This approach assumes that students learn to read a language by studying its vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure, not by actually reading it. In this approach, lower level learners read only sentences and paragraphs generated by textbook writers and instructors. The reading of authentic materials is limited to the works of great authors and reserved for upper level students who have developed the language skills needed to read them.

The communicative approach to language teaching has given instructors a different understanding of the role of reading in the language classroom and the types of texts that can be used in instruction. When the goal of instruction is communicative competence, everyday materials such as train schedules, newspaper articles, and travel and tourism Web sites become appropriate classroom materials, because reading them is one way communicative competence is developed. Instruction in reading and reading practice thus become essential parts of language teaching at every level.

**Making Reading More Communicative**

Many students (and even some instructors) seem to regard reading as a waste of class time but how many of these students will read outside class without encouragement inside? It is worth considering a few approaches to making classroom reading more communicative, by which I mean integrating it with other skills work, so that students can see its value.

## Can reading be communicative?

Communication suggests interaction of some sort, perhaps in many students' minds between speaker and listener. Is reading, therefore, since it is often a solitary activity, a non-communicative activity? Surely not, since the reader is interacting with the writer, though in a less direct way than speaker and listener. Reading is, of course, just as communicative as any other form of language use and as teachers our aim is to bring out that communicative element. For example, by establishing direct communication between reader and writer by exploiting students' written work for reading practice. Another feature of real reading is that while we may read alone we communicate what we read to others constantly. Talking about what we have read is a rich source of classroom possibilities.

## Strategies used for communicative reading

One of the things to bear in mind when lesson planning is that classroom reading is not the same as real reading. Classroom reading aims at helping students develop the skills they need to read more effectively in a variety of ways (the same variety of ways as they can employ in their own languages, of course). To enable this we plan 'pre-reading', 'while-reading', and 'post-reading' stages. These stages can help us make reading more communicative.

## Pre-reading tasks

Pre-reading tasks often aim to raise the readers' knowledge of what they are about to read (their schematic knowledge) as this knowledge will help them to understand the text. In our native language we use this knowledge subconsciously and as a result need to raise it consciously in a foreign language learning context. This raising of awareness is most effectively done collaboratively. Activities I use include:

- Tell your partner what you know about the topic;
- Do a quiz in pairs to find out what you know about the topic;
- Look at and comment some pictures related to the topic;
- Word Splash; (7th Form, Unit 5, Lesson 1, Art and Crafts)
- Predict based on:
  - The title, word clouds; (9th Form, Unit 2, Lesson 4, Citius, Altius, Fortius,) (figure 1)
  - Visuals, video; (8th Form, Unit 2, Lesson 4, Jobs)
  - Knowledge of the author;
  - A skim of the first paragraph;
  - A set of keywords from the text;
  - Reading the end, predicting the beginning.
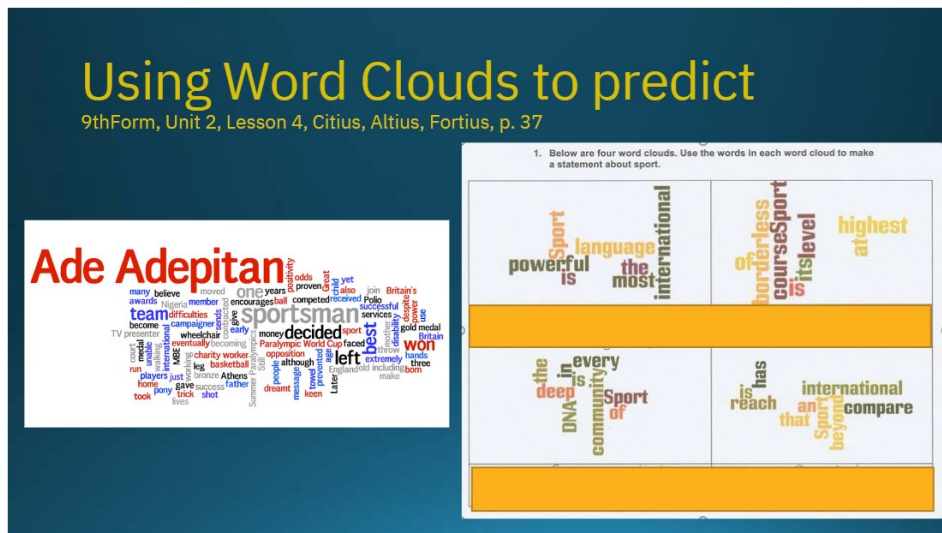  - Reading the middle, predicting the beginning and the end.

**Figure 1. Word Clouds**

**While-reading tasks**

Although reading is often a solitary (individual) activity and the idea of 'reading in pairs' seems odd, reading can be collaborative. Activities I use include:

- Running and reading: this activity especially lends itself to scanning as the idea is to encourage the students to read as quickly as possible in a race. (8th Form, Unit 6, Lesson 1, The News You Care About)

1. Divide the class into student A and student B pairs. Student A sits at one end of the classroom.

2. Stick the text to be read on the wall at the other end of the room.

3. Give student A a list of questions.

4. Student A reads the first question to student B who has to run down the classroom to find the answer in the text, and then run back to dictate the answer to student A, who then tells B question 2 and so on.

5. The first pair to answer all the questions wins. (I ask the students to swap roles halfway through so everyone gets a chance to scan).

- Slashed / Cut up texts: This is a genuinely collaborative reading approach.

1. Photocopy a suitable text and cut it diagonally into four.

2. Seat students in fours. Give a piece of the text to each student. They mustn't show their piece to the others.

3. Give each group a set of questions.

4. The group have to work collaboratively to answer the questions since no one has the whole of the text.

- Info-gap Fill: (8th Form, Unit 2, Lesson 4, Jobs) (figure 2).

**Figure 2. Info-gap Fill**

While-reading tasks lead into **post-reading** tasks:

- Jigsaw reading is an old favourite but perennially effective. This cooperative-learning reading technique gives students the opportunity to specialize in one aspect of a topic, master the topic, and teach the material to group members.

  1. Divide a text into two parts or find two (or three) separate texts on the same topic.
  2. Students A get one text and a related task, students B get the other text and task.
  3. Students A complete their tasks in a group. Students B likewise. Compare answers in A & B groups.
  4. Students get into A & B pairs and tell each other about their tasks. (9th Form, Unit 5, Lesson 1, At Leisure)

- Creating a class text bank: I encourage students to bring in interesting texts that they have found (perhaps as a homework task using the Internet) which can be submitted to the class text bank. For weekend homework each student selects a text to take away which they then discuss with the student who originally submitted it. This is, of course, what readers do in real life.

- Think, pair, share: students are asked to read a passage, then they work independently to solve a problem or answer a set of questions. After that, students share their findings in a group and finally, present their outcomes to the whole class. (8th Form, Unit 5, Lesson 1, Celebrations) (figure 3)

- Exploiting students' written work: I often put students written work up on the walls for the others to read. Tasks can include guessing who the author is, voting on which is the most interesting, selecting some for a class magazine.

As mentioned above, telling someone about what we have read is a very natural reaction to a text. Some ideas I have used include:

- Discussions about the text
- Summarising texts

- Reviewing texts
- Using a 'follow-up' speaking task related to the topic
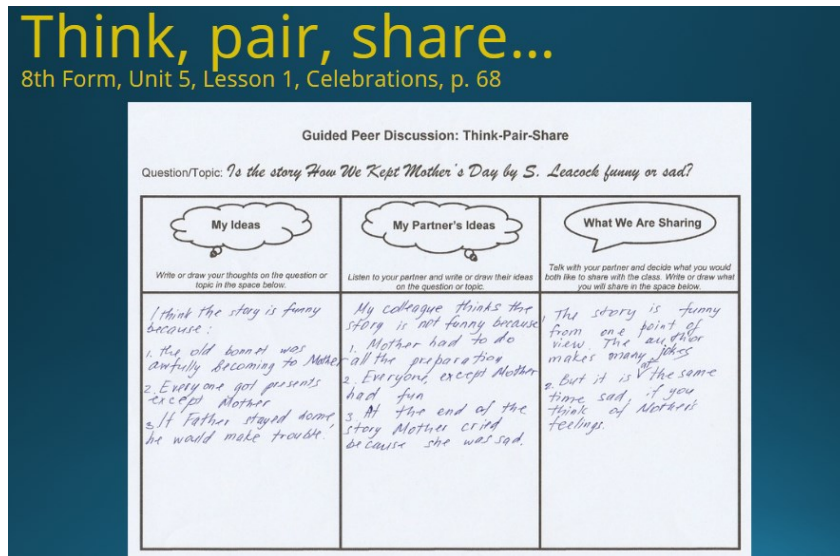- Looking at the language of the text (e.g. collocations).



**Figure 3. Think, pair, share**

**Conclusion**

Teaching reading is definitely a set of challenges, because it has traditionally been viewed as a receptive language skill. However, if we, the teachers, bear in mind that "receptive" doesn't have to mean "passive", we can design successful interactive classes aiming at improving students' reading skills.

We, instructors, usually like quiet classrooms, seeing the silence as an indicator of learning. Of course, in many cases it is true, but these classes lack interactivity, and therefore are less beneficial for the process of learning. Moreover, it's quite problematic to assess learning taking place without some talking; indeed, it's hard to tell if students in a silent classroom are even reading and not daydreaming or actually nodding off! Lastly, these quiet non-interactive classes are simply dull and lifeless, and dullness is not an incentive for students to come to class and learn. The above mentioned strategies will help instructors address these concerns in reading classes by making them participative and insightful.

**Perspective Directions**

I would not be exaggerating to say that one of the things that all the most successful language learners I have met have in common is that they are dedicated readers in English. They all recognised the value of reading as a way to develop their language independently of the classroom but equally saw the value of investing class time in becoming more effective readers in English. They were willing to make this investment because they

realised that reading could be fully integrated into other skills work and thereby be just as communicative as any other classroom practice.

Although researchers tend to agree that incidental learning is responsible for the vast majority of a native language vocabulary learning, and that explicit learning of vocabulary may be responsible for most foreign language vocabulary learning, there is a common perception that "both first language learners and second language learners may incidentally gain knowledge of meaning through reading". Thus, incidental vocabulary learning should be encouraged and incorporated into foreign language learning.

In my future studies I will attempt to analyse incidental vocabulary learning, mainly issues tackling:
- specific circumstances that enable the acquisition of vocabulary through incidental means;
- the effect of reading on incidental vocabulary;
- tools used to promote and enhance the retention of vocabulary through incidental learning.

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