

## Reading to Take Notes and to Summarise: a Classroom Procedure

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A communicative classroom procedure is described (arising out of work done at Istanbul and Boğazici Universities), designed to give students initial practice in the skill of extracting points from a written text in order to make notes on, and to summarise that text. Using various modes of classroom interaction, the procedure gives the students practice in the recognition, production and evaluation of paragraph summaries in note form. As well as describing the procedure, the article presents a piece of material that has been used with several groups of undergraduate and adult students.

### OBJECTIVES

The ability to make notes on a text, and possibly to summarise the content of that text, is clearly very important for students at upper secondary and tertiary levels of education, since this is frequently a crucial requirement of both student and working professional. The necessary skills - difficult enough to acquire in one's own language - become even more of a problem when working in a foreign language. Nevertheless, students in English-medium education must be trained to make notes on, and summarise, texts to the best of their ability, although it may often be the case that they cannot achieve total comprehension of the text. Many EFL textbooks, from the general to the specific, contain note/summary-making practice for this type of student. (See Heaton 1975, Johnson 1981, and Abbs and Freebairn 1982 for examples).

Perhaps the major problem for a student who needs to be able to extract salient points from a text in order to make notes on the text and/or summarise it, is that his earlier experience of reading English has been restricted mainly to a classroom procedure which demands "total comprehension" of the reading passage before him. Rather than learn how to do something with the information to be found in a text, the student has come to regard a text as a huge conglomeration of words, each one of which must be fully understood. The occurrence of unknown words, no matter how unimportant to the main argument of a text, can lead to such feelings of insecurity that the student's overall comprehension breaks down. Furthermore, the widespread secondary school practice of reading texts aloud, both by teacher and by student, may mean that the student has had very little practice in the more normal activity of reading silently for his own information or entertainment.

The procedure described below was designed to introduce students to, and to give them initial practice in, the following reading skills:

1. extracting salient points to summarise;
2. skimming to obtain the gist of the text; and
3. scanning to locate specifically required information. (Munby 1978:121f, 129f).

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The students were first year undergraduates in English-medium further education. They were accustomed to dealing only with reading comprehension passages where “total comprehension” was demanded and tested. The objective now was not merely to change their reading habits on a behavioural basis, but also to make them aware of the need for different reading skills, to help them understand what those skills are, and to make clear how useful such skills can be in a context where the reader does not understand everything in a text.

At a different level, it might also be pointed out that the procedure described in this article has since been used as part of an in-service teacher training seminar, where a peer-demonstration was found to be very useful for contextualising a discussion of:

1. the teaching of skills rather than passages;
2. the role of the teacher during pair and group work;
3. variety of classroom interaction and focus; and
4. the use of L1 during pair and group work.

This article, however, deals only with the teaching of reading skills directly to language learners.

## PROCEDURE

The procedure outlined here refers to the text reproduced later in this article. It goes without saying that the steps given are only suggestions. This procedure has been followed satisfactorily in class with mixed-ability students ranging from upper elementary to upper intermediate (good FCE candidates). Timings will naturally vary, but time limits should be kept tight. It is not necessary for students to complete the tasks set in order to take part in the subsequent phase of activity. What is necessary is for the students to adjust to the feeling of doing the best they can under less than ideal conditions, including time pressure. Thus, in Widdowson’s (1979) terms, they are persuaded that practice in the appropriate *process* is more important than the right-or-wrong product.

### Step 1

Arrange the seating so that students can easily work in pairs and that two pairs can easily form a group of four.

### Step 2 (skimming: individual)

Give a copy of the text to each pair. Tell them to read the instruction that precedes the text. Point out the four minute limit. (In fact this involves a slow reading speed of only 125 words per minute. For my students it came as a shock, then a challenge, then a source of surprised pleasure that they could skim such a passage and understand the gist of it.)

### Step 3 (skimming check: whole class)

Ask simply what the passage is about. A simplified paraphrase of the first paragraph is enough for an answer. Accept any additional points that students want to make, but do not let this step last more than a couple of minutes. Answer no questions on content.

### Step 4 (extracting/scanning: whole class)

Tell the class to read the notes written at point (a) beneath the text, and to read the

paragraph to which they refer. Ask what kind of words the student had left out in order to produce the notes. Get the class to identify the paragraph that the notes under point (b) refer to. Elicit again which words are missed out. Get the students to formulate grammatical sentences that the notes might represent, and point out the deletions.

**Step 5** (extracting: pairs)

Move on to point (c) of the material. The students work in pairs to write notes on the remaining paragraphs. The word limit for the notes is produced, of course, by the teacher producing a satisfactory set of notes, noting the maximum number of words necessary, and adding a few. While the pairs are working, the teacher circulates; firstly to make sure that all the pairs know what they are doing, and secondly to give assistance where students are clearly in great difficulty. The teacher can also take this opportunity of pointing out where such items as articles, auxiliary verbs or prepositions, judged unnecessary in the discussion at step 4, have still been included in students' notes.

**Step 6** (scanning/extracting: pairs)

At a point where all pairs have attempted notes on about five paragraphs, but no pair has finished, tell the students to draw a line under what they have done so far, and to write the letters A to J in a line across their paper. then, on an OHP, show a set of notes on the text, paragraph by paragraph, but in jumbled order. (See below.) The students, still working in pairs, must match the letters of the notes to the numbers of the paragraphs.

**OHP Jumbled Notes** (for Steps 6-8)

- A Soviets produce most engineers - no jobs
- B Numbers keep wages low - engineers changing jobs
- C Russians claim higher education much better than USA
- D Now courses in new fields - diversify
- E Russians proud numbers in high education
- F Still many courses - factory managers overestimate need - insurance
- G Engineers employed for unskilled labour
- H Trying out numbers engineering graduates - train for shortages
- I Soviet engineers less productive than US - many non-professional duties
- J Engineers sweeping streets

**Step 7** (pairs into groups)

After a tight time limit (five minutes might be appropriate), turn the OHP off. Double the pairs up into groups. The pairs should check where they agree, where they differ, and where they have no answer. Tell them they will be given a further two minutes' sight of the notes afterwards.

**Step 8** (scanning/extracting check: groups into whole class)

Show the OHP transparency for another two minutes. Then get each group to report back to the class which notes they were sure of. Show the OHP again one last time, to clear up any disagreements and to discuss the notes.

**Step 9** (extracting: pairs)

Tell the students to return to their own notes, in pairs again. They should try to improve their original notes, and write notes on the remaining paragraphs.

**Step 10** (scanning/extracting: pairs into groups)

Pairs form groups to compare the notes that they made. They should either choose the better composite set of notes, or combine ideas to write an even better set.

**Step 11** (summarizing: individual or pair)

Finally, students reconstitute their notes into a one-paragraph summary of the original text. This can either be set as an individual homework assignment, or as a paired assignment in the subsequent lesson, with the teacher acting as roving consultant. Particular attention, at this stage, is paid to inter-sentence cohesion.

**MATERIAL**

The above procedure can be carried out with a variety of texts - either specifically-selected, or from existing course-books. An example of a purpose-chosen text is reproduced below, taken from the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. In terms of traditional reading comprehension (i.e. total understanding of everything in the passage), the text was too difficult for the students and immediately adjudged so by them. They were, however, able to carry out the tasks set, the completion of which effectively silenced early howls about the words that they did not know. This experience was important for them, as was the feeling of satisfaction and increased confidence that they had when they felt that they had mastered the text.

Read the following text quickly in order to get a general impression of what it says. You have four minutes.

# Too many engineers, too little engineering

from Michael Binyon

MOSCOW

- 1 The Soviet Union produces the largest number of engineers in the world - so many that nowadays many can find jobs only as janitors and part-time street-sweepers.
- 2 Soviet planners and education officials are seriously considering ways to stem the output of unemployable engineering graduates while training more specialists for fields in short supply.
- 3 The Russians are proud of the progress they have made in raising the educational level of

- the Soviet population, and boast that the proportion of school leavers going on to institutes and universities is one of the highest in the world. In 1974-75, for example, 304,000 engineers graduated compared with only 55,000 - less than a fifth - in the United States.
- 4 "The profundity and richness of our programme of instruction, the scope of the knowledge that is being acquired, and the periods of training are immeasurably greater than is the case in most American colleges",

Mr G. Kulagin, a research associate from a Leningrad institute, wrote in one paper.

- 5 But he added that the productivity of Soviet engineers was far lower than in America. Their quality was as good. But their training was not being used. Another paper pointed out that more than half their time was taken up with non-professional duties: delivering goods, arguing with leaders of work brigades, running errands to branch enterprises. Such jobs, the paper said, should be assigned instead to those without engineering degrees.
- 6 A worse consequence of the over-production of graduates and engineering technicians is that these people are employed in factories simply as labour reserves for those occasions when the factory has to provide extra personnel to help with the harvest, or has fallen behind in the fulfilment of its plan. Most of the time these under-employed engineers are sent to help out where the plant is short-staffed - as cleaners and janitors.
- 7 In some places factories, at the request of local councils, arm the engineers with brooms and shovels and send them out to sweep the streets every Friday.
- 8 With so many engineers available, wages have remained low, and many disillusioned graduates, having completed their obligatory two years in the factory to which they are assigned on graduation, change jobs altogether. Some take more profitable jobs as lathe operators or semi-skilled workers in industry, where wages have risen swiftly in recent years. Others find work in roving construction brigades or do odd jobs moonlighting, especially as part-time car mechanics making valuable spare parts that are virtually impossible to obtain on the open market.
- 9 So far there have been no real measures to curb engineering courses. One difficulty is that factory managers deliberately overstate their estimated future need for engineers as an insurance policy.
- 10 However, officials have recognized the need for diversification, and the starting up of courses in newer fields such as cybernetics and new alloys.

(Times Higher Education Supplement 20.11.1981)

- (a) A student wrote these notes on paragraph 2:

*Trying cut numbers engineering graduates - train for shortages*

- (b) The same student wrote these notes on another paragraph:

*Soviet engineers less productive than US - many non-professional duties*

Which paragraph do these notes refer to? Paragraph \_\_\_\_\_

- (c) Now, in pairs, write notes on the other paragraphs. You may not use more than ten words for each paragraph. You have fifteen minutes.

## COMMENTS

The real test of good notes is their usefulness. Sometimes I ask students to write a version of the text based on their notes (Stage 11 above). Alternatively, they are asked to give an oral report based on their notes. In the latter case, listeners to the oral report make notes on it, and then compare these notes with those that they made on the original reading text. At a more sophisticated level, students might be asked to apply the information that they have noted to another topic on which they are asked to write or speak. Similarly, they can be asked to evaluate or comment on the information that they can recall from their notes.

It is, of course, most important to eventually move away altogether from the paragraph-by-paragraph approach. (I have found this approach very useful as a first stage towards the reading objectives outlined above, in that the students are given small and clearly defined pieces of text (i.e. paragraphs) to deal with as a confidence-boosting stage in the movement away from total comprehension of everything in a text). However, it is clearly not the case that each and every paragraph in a text necessarily contains a major element from the text. (With regard to the article on engineering reproduced above, one class immediately wanted to omit paragraph 7 from its final set of notes because it was "only another example of paragraph 6"). This marks the beginning of a consideration of the communicative importance of different elements in a passage. The students are now at a level of sophistication at which they can start to approach a whole text and extract the really salient points from it. Work at this level goes beyond the scope of the present paper, which offers some early steps towards that end, and away from the total-comprehension approach to reading comprehension passages that makes up the English reading experience of many intermediate learners.

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