Classroom Reading through Activating Content-based Schemata

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If we accept that students are more likely to read with a degree of personal engagement and effort texts that deal with topics of interest to them, then the question of student motivation is clearly important. This article considers a three-phase approach to reading in the language classroom, with particular attention to the pre-reading phase, where students' existing content schemata can be activated in an attempt to enhance motivation to read. There is an illustrative example together with a discussion of attendant problems.

INTRODUCTION

Among the aims which readers may have in reading in a foreign language, one is to improve language proficiency, the other is to extract information (fact, opinion, etc) from the text. The degree to which reader aim or intent can be manipulated by set tasks has been investigated by, among others, Royer et al (1984) and Fransson (1984). The general conclusion appears to be that readers read with a greater degree of engagement if they are reading for their own purposes, rather than a purpose imposed by the task. This not unexpected conclusion is also borne out by Olshavsky's (1976) finding that readers with high interest in a text employ more strategies in reading than those with low interest.

The objective for the teacher in the foreign language classroom is therefore clear, though problematic, namely to create a situation where students read a text because they are interested in it. The learner-centred approach would suggest the development of self-access reading schemes, so that readers with different interests may read different texts. An approach to self-access with shorter texts for intensive reading is suggested by Jolly (1984), while Bamford (1984) outlines a self-access system for extensive reading using simplified readers.

However, in some situations a self-access system may not be possible for practical reasons, such as non-availability of texts, or teachers having insufficient time to manage the system. It is also arguable that for general educational reasons a teacher might wish to raise with learners topics which they are not immediately interested in. If one of the aims of education is to awaken or develop interest in areas outside the learner's personal concerns (and I believe it is), then teachers might be justified in such procedures. For both practical and educational reasons, then, there may be occasions when the most appropriate course of action is for the whole class to read the same text at the same time.

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Simply providing learners with a text and asking them to read it is unlikely to achieve the desired engagement on the part of the students. An important factor in generating motivation can be what occurs in the pre-reading phase, which should in turn be linked to the reading and post-reading phases. Before exemplifying with a specific text, it may be useful to review the aims of each phase, together with indications of how teachers may help themselves and their students to meet these aims.

The *pre-reading phase* tries (i) to introduce and arouse interest in the topic; (ii) to motivate students by providing reasons for reading or helping them to specify their own reasons; (iii) to provide when necessary some language preparation for the text. In order to prepare for this, teachers might ask themselves: Why should anyone want to read this text? What knowledge, ideas or opinions might the students have about the text topic, and how might this knowledge be drawn out and used?

What a person knows about a topic is sometimes referred to as a content schema (see Carrell 1983). What the pre-reading phase attempts to do in these terms is to activate existing schemata, and thereby enhance interest in the reading phase.

The *reading phase* itself draws directly on the text. Its main aim is to enable the reader to extract relevant information from the text. Ideally this should be information relevant to the reader's purpose – indeed if the student is to truly engage with the text, then this is the only valid aim. Nevertheless, there may be occasions where tasks imposed by the teacher are appropriate, for example to check comprehension, to clarify text content, or to help understanding of the writer's purpose or text structure. If teachers wish to provide tasks for the reading phase, then they might ask themselves the following questions: What content is to be extracted from the text? What may the reader infer from the text? What language may be learned from the text? How is the text organised?

The aims of the *post-reading phase* are to consolidate or reflect upon what has been read, and to relate the text to the learner's own knowledge, or opinions. Questions that might provide ideas for post-reading work include: Is there further information which students wish to know about the text topic? Do the students know of a similar situation to that presented in the text? Does the text present a situation that calls for recommendations, solutions or completion? Does the text present views that could be argued against?

CLASSROOM PROCEDURE: AN EXAMPLE

We will now consider a specific example, and suggest a set of pre-reading, reading, and post-reading activities related to it. This will be followed by a critical discussion of the suggestions.

Pre-reading Phase

Stage 1*
Let us assume that the text to be dealt with is about "Whales". (Issues of the appropriacy of text will be covered in the discussion section below.) The topic may be elicited by the teacher from the class either by asking students to think of the name of a big animal, then nominating students to give their animal – some-one is sure to mention whales, and if not the teacher may provide prompts (eg "A very big animal"). Alternatives to this introductory procedure are the use of visuals, twenty-question type techniques, or asking students to guess with the help of spelling cues.

Stage 2
Once the topic is established, ask the students to think of one thing that they know about whales. A small selection of ideas are then collected by the teacher from the students on an "open class" basis. This procedure often gives rise to disagreement or doubt which is capitalised upon in the next stage.

Stage 3
The students are asked to work in groups. Each group has to write a list in two columns, the first column listing things about whales that they are sure of, the second listing things that they are not sure of, or don't know. It may be useful for each member of the group in turn to volunteer a fact or question, so that no group member is neglected. The group as a whole decide whether an individual's suggestion is entered into the first or second column. Each member of the group makes their own copy of the list. At the end of this section each member of each group will thus have an identical list, though of course different groups will have different lists. An extract from such a list might look something like this:

Sure	Not sure / Don't know
1. Whales are not fish.	1. How many kinds?
2. The largest are 40 m. long.	2. How long do they live?
3. There are different kinds.	3. What do they eat?
4. They are used to make soap.	4. How heavy are they?
	5. How fast can they swim?

* This particular pre-reading example develops an idea which I first saw demonstrated by Marian Tyacke of the University of Toronto.

This stage clearly requires a range of topic-related vocabulary. Students who do not know a word will either get it from others in the group, or call upon the teacher. (The issue of unpredictable demands being made on the teacher is taken up in the discussion below; for the moment it is worth noting that it is the learners who "define" by whatever means they can, the word they need, rather than the teacher who supplies vocabulary irrespective of need.)

Stage 4
The teacher asks a representative from each group to report to the whole class one or two items from their lists, and notes them on the board. This stage is optional; its purpose is to allow groups to note down interesting items from other groups, which they may not have thought of.

Reading Phase

Stage 5
Students are told that they will be given a text about whales: they are asked to read it, check what they were sure of, and find the answers to what they were not sure of. Their responses can be recorded by writing the line (or page or paragraph) number against that item in their list. The following might be an example of such a text:

Whales the living giants

The largest living mammals
Whales and man are warm-blooded, air-breathing mammals. Whales have lungs and need to come to the surface of the sea to breathe air. They can be separated into two groups, the baleen whales and the toothed whales.
There are about twelve species of baleen whale, all feeding on small plankton organisms. The baleen whales feed by swimming through vast shoals of plankton with their mouths open.
The toothed whales feed on fish and squid which they have to chase in deeper water. Some of these whales can dive to great depths.
The largest animal that has ever lived on this planet is the blue whale, which can grow to 100 feet (30 meters) and about 100 tons in weight. Its sole food is krill, which are shrimp about 2.5 in. (64 mm) long.

Vanishing species
All whales are well adapted to a marine life,
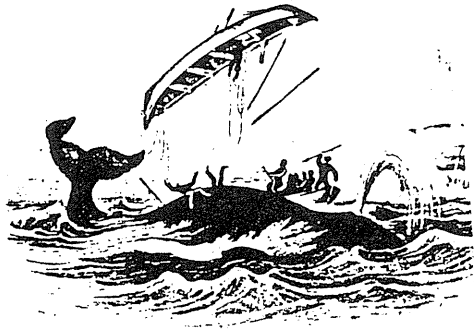
Whaling was once a very dangerous occupation as can be seen in this old print.

Whale products

Paint

Candles

When all members of the group have finished, they can check their responses with each other. Individuals who finish before others may spend their time noting any striking facts they came across in the text.

Stage 6
The teacher checks through some responses on a whole-class basis, using the list noted on the board in Stage 3. Students may be asked to read aloud the sentences which they consider provide appropriate evidence for their responses. There may be some disagreement even at this stage, as students can vary in what they have inferred from the text. For example, one student may infer that the caption beneath the illustration provides evidence for the idea that "Whaling is no longer a dangerous occupation", while a more literally-minded student may object that the text does not say so explicitly.

Post-reading Phase

Stage 7
A variety of possibilities is now open. There will almost certainly be a number of items in the lists that have not been addressed by the text. Students may be asked to research the answers to these by consulting reference books, available experts or other sources. Alternatively they could write a letter asking about the answers to their outstanding questions. If practical, one of these letters may even be sent to an appropriate institution, and the reply circulated to the whole class. A less ambitious and demanding task would be to ask students to write an account of whales based on the information in their lists.

DISCUSSION

The procedure outlined in this example requires that the text and the learners should possess certain attributes. The main attribute of the text is that it should provide factual information. It may be about animals, people, processes, towns, countries etc. For opinion-giving texts, or for fictional texts, alternative activities would clearly be called for. The attributes of the learners are that they should have some knowledge of the text topic (ie a content schema), though this need only be sufficient to enable them to generate appropriate question items. If they have no idea whatsoever of the topic, then there is a danger of their regarding the creation of the lists as a test that they have failed; in extreme cases it could result in misunderstanding of a text, for schema theorists claim that "we comprehend something only when we can relate it to something we already know" (Carrell 1983, 82). Thus, when students read, new information from the text is accommodated to an existing schema. Put in other words, what the students already know before reading the text is not disregarded, but used as a means of motivating them to read the text.

To the extent that the lists of items generated by the group also function in effect as questions, learners are approaching the text to find information that they themselves have specified. Looking for information that will meet these personal questions results generally in students reading the text with a greater degree of engagement than would have been the case if they had simply been asked to read the text and answer a comprehension task prepared by the materials writer or the teacher. This is the case even if those tasks had posed questions substantially the same as those the students raised themselves.

In practice, the pre-reading approach outlined above has its problems. One student-related problem is that some members of the class may specify such esoteric items that very few of them will be dealt with by the text. This can lead to frustration and rejection of the activity. A further problem is that some students may entertain actual antagonism towards the topic raised, particularly if it is a hackneyed one (the "Oh no, not drugs again!" reaction). Again, there may be features intrinsic to the text itself that kill off the students' original interest (cf. Olshavsky 1976).

A further problem which may occur in the section where learners make up the lists is that the teachers are faced with unpredictable language demands, particularly in vocabulary. Native speaker or fluent bilingual teachers may face this situation with equanimity. It can, however, be a source of stress, often without good reason, to some non-native teachers whose prime preoccupation is very often their own language proficiency. Teacher trainers and similar people should be sensitive to this, and exercise discretion in their advocacy of such approaches, or otherwise make provision for tackling such stress.

Finally of course, the technique is, like any other, not one that should be overused. If it is abused, then its most important "deep purpose", that of attempting to foster the habit of curiosity – a habit that can so readily be satisfied through reading – might be thwarted.

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