

READING TASKS

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Abstract

Reading tasks should be based on authentic materials and help students develop reading strategies that would enable them to tackle any kind of texts even outside the classroom.

Key words: skimming, scanning, prediction, guessing, authentic

Surveys have shown that reading is considered to be the most important skill by students in economics. They have to read a lot of coursebooks, articles, business magazines and even fiction and it would be useful for them to be able to tackle different types of texts in an effective way. The following task raises the students' awareness on how to adjust their reading to what they read.

The teacher brings in the classroom six different texts, for example a business letter, a personal letter, some poetry, a travel leaflet, some instructions, a scientific text and divides students into groups. Each group receives one text and has to find out what type of text it is and to name three characteristics. A time limit can be set to fulfill the task, e.g. 5 minutes.

The teacher draws a table on the board and writes the students' answers:

business letter personal letter poetry travel leaflet scientific text instructions

- formal
- neutral
- concise

After 5 minutes groups exchange texts, so that those who dealt with the business letter deal with the personal letter and vice versa, those who read the piece of poetry read the scientific text, etc.

In groups they will compare text types. Features such as style, register, intended audience, the writer's purpose, length, place where they can find those texts will be discussed.

Good readers are flexible, so students should be aware that they have to tackle texts differently and adjust their reading according to what they read. Students should be encouraged to select and bring in the classroom texts that appeal to them.

The discussion might be carried on by emphasizing that there are other aspects that can influence our reading style.

Another task will encourage students to predict in order to make the reading process more effective. If we adopt Nuttall's definition of reading as "a constant making and remaking of hypotheses", "a psycholinguistic guessing game" (1982:12) we can imagine what a useful skill prediction might be in order to tackle difficult texts. When we approach a text we expect to get answers to some of our questions, presuppositions might be confirmed or not, our beliefs, opinions, expectations might be altered as a result of the interaction with the text. The same thing happens as in genuine communication, except that the interlocutor is not present.

In conversation, in order to understand the message we look at the speaker's face, follow his or her gestures, mimicry. Similarly, when we read a text we should take into consideration linguistic as well as nonlinguistic clues, such as layout, drawings, diagrams, headings, etc.

I designed a task for students in management but it can be adapted to business students in general.

As a second year student in Management your attention is drawn by the title of an article in "The Business Magazine", "Becoming an International Manager". However, the prospect of looking for a job is far away, so you are not so keen to find out every detail from the text.

STEP 1

Before skimming the article imagine and write in red what qualities might be required in order to become an international manager.

STEP 2

Skim the text and write in blue the qualities mentioned in the text. Are there any that you predicted before reading?

STEP 3

Provide your definition of what an international manager might be.

STEP 4

Scan the article in order to find out the definition given in the text and fill in a diagram:

BEING AN INTERNATIONAL MANAGER IS A QUESTION OF INTERNATIONAL

Attitude

STEP 5

What do you think, are you the right person to become an international manager?

This could be practiced as a post reading activity, in an oral or written form. We can also ask students what helped them to predict what was written in the text:

- How much did they rely on their previous knowledge of the topic?
- How much did the title and the headings of the article help them predict what was in the text?
- While reading did they look for key words or key sentences in the text?
- What else did help them to get information rapidly and accurately from the text (layout, punctuation, grammar, etc)?

Skimming and scanning can also be trained by designing appropriate tasks. They are necessary techniques for quick and effective reading . When skimming we can get the main ideas of a text, a glimpse of how it is organised and of the writer's intention and tone. When scanning we look for specific information such as: names, dates, figures, etc. without getting through all the text .

Students in economics have to deal with a large amount of written information and being able to obtain what they need quickly and effectively would save a lot of their time and effort.

Here is a task that may improve skimming and scanning but also study skills and can be practiced with a group of third year students in International Business and Economics.

I ask them to prepare a topic, e.g. “ BRITAIN'S EXPORT OF AIRPLANES”. The students are given two weeks to complete the task.

The aim of the task is to train students to use titles and tables of contents to get an idea of what a book or article is about.

Skills involved: study skills, skimming and scanning.

STEP 1

- Use the reference index of your faculty's library in order to select the materials you need.
- Choose a few books and articles whose titles seem to suit your topic.
- Look at the table of content in order to make sure that the book treats the topic announced by the title.

STEP 2

- Each member of the group or in pairs will deal with different areas of the same topic, for example: 'Britain's Export of Airplanes to the EU Countries', 'Britain's Exports of Airplanes to Romania', etc.
- Skim the table of content and decide what chapters you should read. Do not read the whole book.
- Read quickly through the first paragraph of the chapter you have chosen. If it interests you, you should read it thoroughly to the end.
- Take notes. Discuss and compare your notes with your peer.
- Scan the text whenever you need to find out specific information.

STEP 3

- Give an oral presentation on 'Britain's Export of Airplanes to e.g. Romania'

By training reading strategies and designing appropriate tasks we can help our students to become good, flexible, responsive readers, capable and willing to continue reading outside the classroom.

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