

Using a 'standard exercise' in teaching reading comprehension

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This article is a report on a procedure devised to train students in efficient reading comprehension strategies, by using a 'standard exercise' which can be applied to almost any text. This allows for much greater freedom in text selection. The standard exercise itself is followed by explanations of the purpose of each question in it, and a brief account of students' reactions to using it. The article ends with some comments on text selection. Although the procedure originated in the context of English for specific purposes, it could equally well be used in general English courses, and much of the article could equally apply to listening comprehension.

The problem of producing useful exercises on new texts

One of the problems faced by teachers of English could be summed up in the expression 'You can't have your cake and eat it'. Course designers and teachers may have available a number of good texts, suitable in various ways for the students they are responsible for, and a number of exercises to practise certain teaching points arising from those texts. But after any given text has been used once with a particular group of students, its communicative value is lost. And after a time, the text may lose its suitability in other ways: it becomes dated, teachers are fed up with it, new students have different interests, and so on. In the real world, we cannot find time to produce worthwhile new exercises to keep up with all the new texts we might wish to use for reading comprehension work. This is true not only in ESP (English for specific purposes), but in all English language teaching.

Since we cannot both keep this 'cake' fresh and eat it, we tend to go on using the same old texts and exercises for too long, supplementing this rather stale diet with new texts from magazines, newspapers, etc.—usually with a general and rather vague instruction to 'read the text for extra practice'.

This article reports on a procedure designed to get round this problem in part. It involves a 'standard exercise' which can be used with virtually any text. In our ESP situation at the Federal University of Santa Catarina in Brazil, our course consists of a number of texts of general interest, and exercises on grammar, rhetorical functions, thinking skills, 'coping strategies', vocabulary, etc. However, as we were trying out a self-access approach, we wanted to use as the main component of our course in English for academic purposes a large and versatile battery of texts from which students could choose those which appealed to them. Some of these

texts are subject-specific: since the students in our experimental self-access course are dentistry students, some of the texts are from dentistry textbooks or journals.

As very little is known about the efficiency of particular exercises or exercise-types dealing with grammar, functions, and so on, we wanted to get our students to read a lot, and widely, tackling particular problems of grammar, functions, study skills, thinking skills or vocabulary only in accordance with their individual needs. We felt it essential for our students to have a very wide choice of texts to read individually. Therefore any coursebooks we used were supplementary, not the main component of our self-access approach. What we needed for this was a principled procedure which could apply to any text and which would guide the student towards more efficient and critical reading strategies.

For this reason, the standard exercise we describe here does not purport to deal with the specific *teaching points* to be found in any text (which may not be logically possible anyway). It is intended, rather, to guide students in *strategies* for reading any text.

The view of reading implicit in the standard exercise

Our view of reading is based on the writings of those like Smith (1978), Goodman (1967), and Coady (1979) who show that reading is essentially a 'top-down' process, whereby the reader samples the text visually, making use of background knowledge—what Widdowson (1983), following Bartlett (1932), calls 'schematic knowledge'. To understand, the reader has to proceed reasonably fast if 'tunnel vision' (the inability to see the wood for the trees) is to be avoided. This rapid sampling of the text is based on the reader's 'hypotheses': at all times we are unconsciously predicting the content and the sense of what we are reading and are about to read.

Readers in a foreign language are especially prone to 'tunnel vision', of course: they are held up by problems of vocabulary and grammar. What we have been trying to do, however, is to train students to 'cope', to use a 'top-down' strategy, applying their background knowledge and hypotheses about text meaning to the full. As a consequence, students realize that they *can* read authentic texts without frustratingly frequent reference to the dictionary, which is most important from an affective point of view. At the same time, they have to concentrate on the main ideas, as they will not be able to grasp all the details.¹

The standard exercise in its context

The version given in Figure 1 is a translation of the standard exercise we use, which is presented to students in their first language (L1), Portuguese. We do not present full details of our self-access course here; as far as the 'standard exercise' is concerned, the most relevant facts are as follows: (a) students select sixteen texts out of a battery of some 200, and answer the questions in the 'standard exercise' on each text. (b) Exactly the same 'standard exercise' is used for tests. (c) Students work when and where they wish. (d) Individual problems are tackled as they crop up, using other exercises and texts not reported on here.

Comments on the questions in the standard exercise

Question 1 aims to get the student predicting intelligently, anticipating problems before they arise. Question 2 starts the comprehension process at the level of general comprehension, requiring skimming for a general overview. We try to start from what the student knows already, not (as is commonly the case) from what he or she does not know.

As you look through the questions in the standard exercise, you will see

- 1 Read only the title of your text. Predict and write down at least five vocabulary items—key words—which you expect to see in the text. Use a dictionary if necessary. The key words can be noted down in English or in Portuguese.
 - 2 Skim the text quickly (maximum one minute), looking for key words in the text. Use all the typographical indications, your previous knowledge, cognates, and repeated words. Now write down, in no more than fifteen words, the main theme of the text.
- Re-read the text as often as necessary to answer the following questions:
- 3 What seems to be the author's main intention: to *persuade* you or just to *inform* you?
 - 4 Write down any words which look important in the text (key words) which you did not know before reading it. Beside each one, write down your idea of what it probably means.
 - 5 Write down the main idea of each paragraph, using only one sentence for each main idea. If the text consists of more than seven paragraphs, write down the main idea of each main section. Avoid translating, and try not to mention insignificant details.
 - 6 Divide the text into sections. Is there an introduction? If so, where does it end? Is there a conclusion? If so, where does it start? Explain your answer.
 - 7 Write one sentence reporting something which you learned from the text.
 - 8 Critical reaction: whose interests does this text reflect? Which country, which social class, or which institution? Who would find the publication of this text desirable? Is the information in this text applicable to your own situation?
 - 9 Indicate your interest in this text, using a scale from 1 to 5 (5 = very interesting, 1 = very boring).
 - 10 How many times did you need to use a dictionary to answer the questions so far?
 - 11 Write down the number of each paragraph which you feel you couldn't understand properly, or aren't sure you understood.
 - 12 Try to work out why you found the paragraphs you listed in the last question so difficult. What was the main reason?—
 - a. lack of previous knowledge of the topic
 - b. a grammatical problem (which one?)
 - c. inefficient reading strategies
 - d. difficulty in separating main points from details
 - e. difficulty in identifying the introduction or conclusion
 - etc.
 - 13 Now estimate your comprehension of the text (e.g. 50 per cent, 80 per cent).

Figure 1. Standard Exercise (translated from Portuguese)

that there is some development from very superficial skimming (to achieve 'general comprehension', as in Question 2) to deeper and more critical levels of comprehension. In fact, we distinguish between three main levels of comprehension: 'general comprehension', 'main points comprehension' (focusing on the paragraph in written texts), and 'detailed comprehension'. In real life, preliminary skimming often suffices for particular purposes (such as deciding what to read more carefully, eliminating articles or sections of no interest at the time, etc.). Alternatively, a search for the main points, disregarding the details, may be quite enough in many situations. Our standard exercise concentrates on the first two levels of comprehension, because of the limited time available and our students' initial level of English.

Question 3 originally required a much more complete analysis of the rhetorical functions in the text, but we simplified this to deal with functions and their markers in separate exercises according to need. This question, therefore, simply attempts to identify the difference between persuasion/argument and a more factual exposition.

Question 4, identifying key words, is aimed at developing several useful skills: (a) awareness of the relative importance of different vocabulary items; (b) not bothering about the insignificant items; and (c) trying to work out the meaning of unknown words from context before using a dictionary.

Question 5 aims at 'main points' comprehension. The recommendation to avoid translating and giving unimportant details was inserted after piloting the materials: many students, we found, had trouble in distinguishing the main from the marginal points. We are in the process of further research on this quite tricky area.

The point of Question 6 is to go back to the development of the main ideas presented. It has been interesting for all of us to see how quite often texts, particularly articles from journals, have both an introduction and a conclusion in the first paragraph.

Most of the questions from 7 to the end aim to elicit personal reactions. This reflects our belief that reading without some sort of personal involvement is likely to be virtually useless. The last few questions (10 to 13), concern themselves with the student's own reaction to his or her reading difficulties and progress. Question 13, asking for the student's own evaluation of what he or she understood, is obviously very vague, and the percentage answer is not designed to give an air of spurious precision. In fact, we get answers like 60 per cent, 75 per cent, etc., which indicate that the reader knows that he or she did not understand all the details. The answer to Question 5 shows quite clearly whether the student understood the main ideas or not.

**Reactions to the
standard exercise**

It is interesting that, although one of the first reactions of teachers—colleagues in the Brazilian National ESP Project—was to suggest that using the standard exercise would be boring for the students, we have not heard this from the students themselves. They have complained that it is quite a long exercise, and takes time to do. They find Questions 3, 5, and 6 quite tricky: it seems that distinguishing a factual from a persuasive text can be hard, and seeing clearly what is an introduction and what is a conclusion is surely quite difficult for anyone. Question 5 takes time, as each main point must be explained.

We have found it necessary, of course, to explain and provide examples of all of these points. However, though we believe them all to be important, there is no satisfactory theory of 'main points', of 'introductions', or even of rhetorical functions, so we give several examples to make these rather subjective notions clearer.

The division into persuasive/informative functions is related to the late J. Ewer's classification (1981), which distinguishes 'mainly informational' microacts from 'mainly attitudinal' ones. However, our treatment is cursory and intuitive. With examples of advertisements, letters, and book reviews, noting such features as 'better than . . .', 'Write for details to . . .', or such adjectives as 'deplorable', 'record-breaking', 'advanced', etc., we find students are gradually able to learn to make this major distinction, which is parallel to Halliday's distinction between the 'interpersonal' and 'ideational' functions.

The ability to distinguish a major point from a minor detail is vital. We find some students list almost all the details. Others give such a sketchy outline (e.g. 'Paragraph 3: results of the experiment') that we cannot know whether they understood the main ideas or not, even if they have recog-

nized the major sections of the text. One recommendation we make is that students should study the first sentence of each paragraph more carefully than the others, and also read the first and last paragraphs more carefully than the middle ones. Another is that they should try to relate the title, introduction, and conclusion carefully to the paragraphs in the text. But here again, examples are probably the best guide for students.

As teachers, we have found that the 'standard exercise' gives us quite a good idea of each student's ability to comprehend. As a testing technique it has proved quite satisfactory, if rather slow to correct. Also, we have been satisfied with it as a means of training students to use better reading strategies. Perhaps because the student has to do the 'standard exercise' at least twenty times in the semester (sixteen times on student-selected practice texts, plus a further four times for tests), he or she seems to progress well in reading for main points. We conducted a questionnaire evaluation after a semester of piloting the exercise. Students compared their estimated ability to read authentic texts at the beginning of the semester with their ability at the end of the semester. After a forty-five hour course, these false beginner university students estimated that their ability to read authentic texts in English had gone up from an average of 2.9 (on a scale from 0 to 9) to an average of 6.7—an increase of 230 per cent. (The standard deviations were 1.8 and 1.1 respectively.) They attributed their main difficulties at the beginning of the semester to lack of vocabulary. They felt that the course had helped them most in learning appropriate strategies, and in learning to distinguish the main points in texts from the details. Out of forty-six students, forty said they would be able in future to cope with 'main points comprehension' of their academic reading list, two said they would not, and four did not know or did not answer that question.

This questionnaire did not focus directly on the standard exercise, and questionnaires generally are not very reliable instruments, but we feel that the results of the course were satisfactory and confirmed the usefulness of the standard exercise as a teaching and practice procedure.

**Some comments on
text selection**

What kinds of text would a standard exercise be useful for? We have found periodicals like *New Scientist* and *Scientific American* to be good sources of up-to-date texts which are communicative in the sense that the information in them can be expected to be unknown even to the subject-specialist. Textbooks and encyclopaedias have also proved good sources. In a general English course, a wider range of sources, such as newspapers and non-academic magazines, advertisements, instruction manuals, or leaflets, can easily be used.

We feel that there are at least two main principles to be kept in mind: first, it is important to ensure that there is a moderate information gap between what the reader already knows about the topic, and what the text has to say, so that the 'load' of new information is not too great, while at the same time there is new information in the text. And secondly, even for subject-specialists, the principle of 'field of knowledge' should be observed. This principle, first brought to our attention by our colleague John Holmes of the Brazilian National ESP Project, is illustrated in Figure 2. Figure 2 shows three concentric layers in a subject-specialist's 'field of knowledge', all of which may suggest ideas for text selection. There seems no reason why an ESP course should deal only with topics from the innermost circle. In our course we aim also at the middle circle, and in a

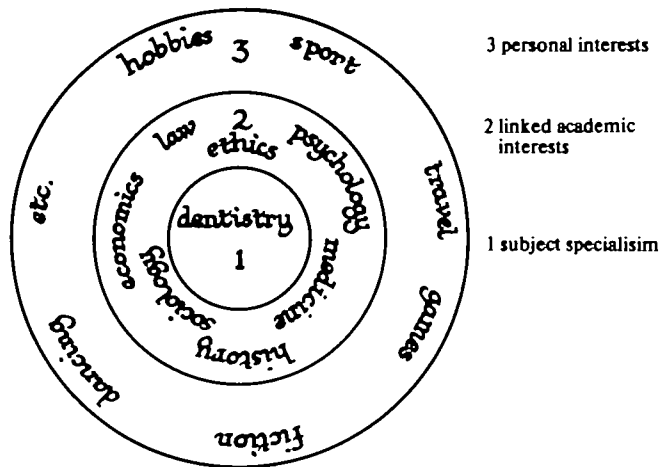


Figure 2. The 'field of knowledge' illustrated with reference to a student of dentistry

general ELT course any of these circles could provide good topics for texts or listening materials.

Perhaps the most important principle, though, and the one which this article and the 'standard exercise' have attempted to follow, is that there should be a wide choice of fresh and interesting texts.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, we suggested that you can't have your cake and eat it. By using a wide variety of new texts, and a standard exercise, it becomes possible to have fresh cakes more often. But we are not suggesting a Marie-Antoinette diet of pure cake: the standard exercise needs supplementing with greens and protein in the shape of grammar, functions, vocabulary, problem-solving skills, etc.

We would be interested to hear from other readers of this journal who may have experimented with a 'standard exercise' like the one reported here. □

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Notes

- 1 These ideas of reading are more fully explained in Scott 1981a and Scott 1981b.
- 2 In the National ESP Project in Brazilian universities, in the context of which this work was carried out, the participating universities have identified reading comprehension as the most pressing need; explanations are therefore usually given in the students' L1.

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