Unit 5   Reading

▓ What is reading?

Reading is one of the four language **skills**: reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is a **receptive skill**, like listening. This means it involves responding to text, rather than producing it. Very simply we can say that reading involves making sense of text. To do this we need to understand the language of the text at word level, sentence level and whole-text level. We also need to connect the message of the text to our knowledge of the world. Look at this sentence, for example:

The boy was surprised because the girl was much faster at running than he was.

To understand this sentence, we need to understand what the letters are, how the letters join together to make words, what the words mean and the grammar of the words and the sentence. But we also make sense of this sentence by knowing that, generally speaking, girls do not run as fast as boys. Our knowledge of the world helps us understand why the boy was surprised.

▓ Key concepts

Can you think of reasons why learners may find reading difficult?

A text is usually longer than just a word or a sentence. It often contains a series of sentences, as in a letter or even a postcard. These sentences are connected to one another by grammar and vocabulary and/or knowledge of the world. Reading also involves understanding the connection between sentences. For example:

The boy was surprised because the girl was much faster at running than he was. Then he found out that her mother had won a medal for running at the Olympic Games.

The second sentence gives us a possible reason why the girl was so good at running. But we can only understand that this is a reason if we know that Olympic runners are very good. This means we need to use our knowledge of the world to see the connection between these two sentences (**coherence**). The grammatical links between the sentences (**cohesion**) also help us see the connection between them. For example, in the second example sentence 'he' refers to 'the boy' in the first sentence, and 'her' refers to 'the girl'.

When we read we do not necessarily read everything in a text. What we read depends on why and how we are reading. For example, we may read a travel website to find a single piece of information about prices. But we may read a novel in great detail because we like the story and the characters and want to know as much as we can about them.

These examples show us that we read different text types and we read for different reasons. Some examples of written text types are letters, articles, postcards, stories, information brochures, leaflets and poems. All these kinds of text types are different from one another. They have different lengths, layouts (the ways in which text is placed on the page), topics and kinds of language. Learning to read also involves learning how to handle these different text types.

Our reasons for reading influence how we read, i.e. which reading **subskill** (a skill that is part of a main skill) we use. For example, if we read a text just to find a specific piece or pieces of information in it, we usually use a subskill called **reading for specific information** or **scanning**. When we scan, we don't read the whole text. We hurry over most of it until we find the information we are interested in, e.g. when we look for a number in a telephone directory.

Another reading subskill is **reading for gist** or **skimming**, i.e. reading quickly through a text to get a general idea of what it is about. For example, you skim when you look quickly through a book in a bookshop to decide if you want to buy it, or when you go quickly through a reference book to decide which part will help you write an essay.

A third reading subskill is **reading for detail**. If you read a letter from someone you love who you haven't heard from for a long time, you probably read like this, getting the meaning out of every word.

Another way of reading is **extensive reading**. Extensive reading involves reading long pieces of text, for example a story or an article. As you read, your attention and interest vary – you may read some parts of the text in detail while you may skim through others.

Sometimes, especially in language classrooms, we use texts to examine language. For example, we might ask learners to look for all the words in a text related to a particular topic, or work out the grammar of a particular sentence. The aim of these activities is to make learners more aware of how language is used. These activities are sometimes called **intensive reading**. They are not a reading skill, but a language learning activity.

We can see that reading is a complicated process. It involves understanding letters, words and sentences, understanding the connections between sentences (coherence and cohesion), understanding different text types, making sense of the text through our knowledge of the world and using the appropriate reading subskill. Reading may be a receptive skill but it certainly isn't a passive one!

Key concepts and the language teaching classroom

- If learners know how to read in their own language, they can transfer their reading skills to reading in English. Sometimes though, they find this difficult, especially when their language level is not high, and they need help to transfer these skills. Teachers need to check which reading subskills their learners are good at, then focus on practising the subskills they are not yet using well, and, if necessary, on teaching them language which will help them do this.

- Giving learners lots of opportunities for extensive reading, in or out of class, helps them to develop their fluency in reading.

- The reading subskills that we need to teach also depend on the age and first language of the learners. Some learners of English, e.g. young children, may not yet know how to read in their own language. They need to learn how letters join to make words and how written words relate to spoken words both in their language and in English. Other learners may not understand the script used in English as their own script is different, e.g. Chinese, Arabic. These learners need to learn the script of English, and maybe also how to read a page from left to right.

- We need to choose the right texts for our learners. Texts should be interesting for learners in order to motivate them. Texts should also be at the right level of difficulty. A text may be difficult because it contains complex language and/or because it is about a topic that learners don't know much about.

- We can make a difficult text easier for learners to read by giving them an easy comprehension task. Similarly, we can make an easier text more difficult by giving a hard comprehension task. This means that the difficulty of a text depends partly on the level of the comprehension task that we give to learners.
- Sometimes we may ask learners to read texts that are specially written or simplified for language learners. At other times they may read articles, brochures, story books, etc. that are what a first language speaker would read. This is called **authentic material**. The language in authentic material is sometimes more varied and richer than the language in simplified texts. Experts believe that learners learn to read best by reading both simplified and authentic materials.
- Different reading comprehension tasks and exercises focus on different reading subskills. Teachers need to recognise which subskill a task focuses on.
- Teachers need to choose comprehension tasks very carefully. They need to be of an appropriate level of difficulty and practise relevant reading subskills.
- The activities in a reading lesson often follow this pattern:
  1 Introductory activities: an introduction to the topic of the text and activities focusing on the language of the text
  2 Main activities: a series of comprehension activities developing different reading subskills
  3 Post-activities: activities which ask learners to talk about how a topic in the text relates to their own lives or give their opinions on parts of the text. These activities also require learners to use some of the language they have met in the text.

See Unit 16 for activities practising different reading subskills, Module 2.1 for lesson planning and Module 2.2 for resources to help plan lessons.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY *(See page 171 for answers)*

Look at this text and activities from a coursebook for intermediate level teenagers and young adults. What does each activity aim to do? Match the activities with the aims in the box. (There is one extra aim.)

to relate the text to our world knowledge	to practise skimming
to introduce the topic	to practise reading for specific information

BEFORE READING

1 Do people eat out a lot in your country?
2 What different kinds of foods are there?

When people think of food in the United States, they think mostly of fast foods like hamburgers and hot dogs. In fact, in U.S. cities like New York and Los Angeles, there are thousands of different kinds of restaurants with foods from all over the world.

So if you like to try different foods, the United States is the place for you. The United States has people from all over the world, and they bring with them typical foods from their countries. You can eat tempura in Japanese restaurants, tacos in Mexican restaurants, paella in Spanish restaurants, pasta in Italian restaurants, and you can also eat America's most popular food, pizza.

Yes, pizza! Pizza is originally from Italy, but today it is an important part of the U.S. menu. There are about 58,000 pizzerias in the United States – that's about 17 percent of all restaurants in the country, and the number is growing.

The United States has eating places for all tastes – and all pockets. You can buy a hot dog on the street and pay one or two dollars. Or you can go to a four-star restaurant and pay $200 for a dinner.

AFTER READING

A Read the article and fill in the information:

1 Number of different kinds of restaurants in the U.S.	
2 Cost of a meal at a very good restaurant	
3 Cost of a hot dog on the street	
4 Number of pizzerias in the U.S.	

B Make a typical menu from your country. Include food for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

(adapted from *SuperGoal 2* by Manuel dos Santos, McGraw-Hill 2001)