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**Reading Skills Development for the New
Maturita Exam**

Diploma Thesis

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Declaration

I hereby declare that I worked on my thesis on my own and used only the sources listed in the bibliography.

I agree that the thesis be deposited in the library of the Faculty of Education of Masaryk University in Brno and made accessible for study purposes.

Brno, 16th April 2010

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Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to focus on English language reading skills and strategies development for exam practice, particularly the forthcoming form of the Maturita Exam. The reasons for choosing the topic are as follows: Firstly, reading is generally considered a fundamental language skill in both first and foreign language and plays an indispensable role in our everyday lives. Secondly, despite its indisputable importance, language learners frequently lack adequate tools to help them tackle written material successfully.

Even though the system is still not fully prepared for the new Maturita exam, it is almost certain that it will be launched in 2011. Since the whole concept of the exam has been subjected to significant change in recent years, it is important to adjust the way we teach in order to comply with its new requirements. Regarding foreign languages, students will take a complex exam testing their command of the language in all its aspects. It is therefore essential to provide them with sufficient instruction and a considerable amount of practice to increase their prospects for success.

The theoretical part of this thesis deals with reading as a skill and provides an overview of the sub-skills and strategies important for successful reading. Further chapters compare the present and the incoming Maturita exam, focusing primarily on the reading paper of the new form of the examination. A detailed description of all its parts is given, discussing the most important features.

The practical part comprises a description of the procedures and results of action research conducted in a class of third year students who are supposed to take the new Maturita exam in 2011. It offers a number of activities for promoting reading, providing their evaluation and ideas for modification to match both Maturita exam requirements and the students' needs and interests.

The main aim of this work is to find out which reading skills are most important for success in the new Maturita exam in English and how reading activities should be designed in order to facilitate students' understanding, increase their reading speed and comprehension and support their confidence in reading in English.

1. Theoretical Part

The following chapters of this thesis focus on the issue of reading. First, they briefly look at the history and development of reading, discussing its role and significance in the 21st century. Subsequently the focus shifts to the nature of reading itself, both in the first and a foreign language, discussing its purposes and the processes behind successful reading. They also provide a general overview of the skills and strategies that are regarded as essential for successful reading and offer a theoretical basis for English language reading development for exam practice. Later, the thesis moves to the Maturita exam. It provides the definition of the term and presents the reader with basic information concerning the organization and requirements of the present and incoming form of the exam with particular focus on the reading paper.

1.1. Reading

The ability to read has always been considered a fundamental element of literacy in every culture or language. It is a phenomenon that first appeared about five thousand years ago. When compared to spoken language that has been alive for millions of years, the history of reading is relatively short (Hudson 7). Nevertheless, it has “challenged, empowered, bewitched and enriched” man ever since it appeared for the first time and thus it truly deserves to be seen as “the voice of civilization itself” (Fischer 7).

Interestingly enough, almost the entire population of the world was illiterate until the 20th century. Nowadays, the expectation is that all members of modern society will be able to read and understand (Wolfe 1). Considering the amount of written material we negotiate in our day-to-day lives, the role of reading is obvious. No longer do we encounter texts in print or handwriting only. A great number of texts are available through electronic media, especially the Internet. As we live in the 21st century, the age of information, effective reading has become an absolute must.

Reading itself is not easy to define, since the term has multiple meanings, depending on particular context and situation. It is often perceived as the mere ability to decode the alphabet and identify words in print, which is the main concern of the early stages of reading. Looking from a different angle provides us with another view, linking the writing system with speaking through actually pronouncing the words. This is another common practice in an early reading classroom. Finally, reading can be associated with grasping the meaning, interpreting the text and understanding the message the writer is trying to convey (Nuttall 2). The meaning, however, is not simply laid on the printed page, but requires an active and skilled reader possessing necessary background knowledge in order to be deciphered (Anderson 1). Apparently, reading is a very complex process comprising interaction between the text, reader and outside world.

Since this thesis deals primarily with reading development for exam practice, the term reading is understood as a process that goes beyond mere literacy in terms of recognizing the type and connecting it with sounds. It is the ability of the experienced reader to interact with a text and comprehend its message. The following chapters focus on various aspects of reading in more detail, discussing its nature, reading and readers' purposes, and the relation to other language skills, especially writing. The essential characteristics of reading in a foreign language are also summarized below.

1.1.1. Nature of Reading

Wolfe claims that unlike speaking, reading is “an unnatural act”. It is not easily acquired, but has to be learnt through careful instruction beginning in childhood. Despite this, most people become independent and fluent readers. She stresses that “reading in any language always poses a challenge, but reading in English is particularly difficult”, thanks to its orthography and the way it is linked to the spoken form of the language. Apart from the letter-sound relations, whose “decoding eventually becomes automatic,” there are many other features that make reading a difficult skill to master even for more advanced users of English (2 – 3). As has already been mentioned, reading is a complex and interactive process that could be seen as communication between the writer and reader. The success of this communication relies upon numerous factors, some of the most important of which are briefly described below.

Firstly, both the writer and reader need to “share the same code” (Nuttall 6). Unless they use the same language and understand its vocabulary and grammatical structures, the communication is not successful. Moreover, the reader needs to be aware of the multiple meanings of certain words and expressions and make appropriate choices in order to reconstruct the message from the text (Hudson 8).

Secondly, the writer and reader should share the same or similar “assumptions about the world and the way it works”. When the writer and the reader are “closely similar in background, training, attitude” and other aspects, “the reader is more likely to interpret the text with no conscious effort”. However, the danger of misinterpretation cannot be completely eliminated, simply because all of us have slightly different life experience (Nuttall 6 – 9).

In contrast to face-to-face interaction, both the writer and reader “have time at their disposal”. The writer can carefully structure the text, draft and redraft it, making all necessary changes to make it comprehensible for the reader. The reader can stop and think about what they have just read, go back to check their understanding or reread the passages they find difficult. (Nuttall 10 – 11). Since the writer is not normally available for consultation, the reader has to rely entirely on the text itself. For that reason, the reader needs to be actively involved, flexible and respond appropriately to the material in hand in order to make sense of the text and benefit from the information it contains (Wallace 5). Thus, effective reading is largely dependent on the physical and social context and past experience shared by the writer and reader.

The implications for teaching practice include increasing learners’ potential by drawing on existing strengths in reading in their mother tongue. Naturally, readers are likely to need more guidance and support from the teacher when encountering unfamiliar contexts (Wallace 23). It is therefore crucial to teach learners to activate and utilize the background knowledge they possess and connect it with the textual information in order to build comprehension.

1.1.2. Reading Purposes

As a language skill, reading is generally used to satisfy different needs of readers. These needs can be divided into distinct categories, depending on the main focus of reading in a particular context. Following Wallace’s distinction, there are three main reasons for reading: reading for survival, reading for learning and reading for pleasure (6-7).

Survival reading, sometimes also referred to as functional reading, can be defined as the ability to read and comprehend material people commonly encounter in their everyday lives. Such material includes street signs, labels, notices, instructions for use etc. (Cassidy). This type of reading is closely tied to one's immediate environment and serves our current needs. The material considered to be important may vary, depending on the situation and differing according to what each individual perceives to be of relevance to them.

Reading for learning serves to broaden one's horizons and extend one's knowledge of the world around. It is connected to reading both inside and outside the classroom as we often need to learn a new fact or remind ourselves of something we have already forgotten over time. Speaking of foreign language teaching and learning, reading is frequently used for purposes different from those found in the mother tongue. They range from pronunciation practice to grammar and vocabulary teaching. The main focus is language improvement and thus the reasons for reading are often far from authentic. Concerning textbooks, the reading material they contain regularly suffers from the following disadvantages: texts are contrived, unnatural and over-explicit, dealing with over-familiar topics with many of them containing no message at all. Thus, if we want to develop students' reading skills, we should make use of authentic material written for authentic reasons, for example: to entertain or instruct (Nuttall 21).

Reading for pleasure is a goal in itself. It can be defined as "reading that we do of our own free will anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading" or "reading that having begun at someone else's request we continue because we are interested in it." It normally includes material of the reader's own choice that is read at a time and place suitable to them (Clark 6). As Wallace points out, the most important by-product of pleasure reading is fluency (7).

Following readers' purposes from a slightly different perspective, Wallace distinguishes reading for general purposes, reading for specific purposes and reading for pleasure. The last item will not be dealt with again since it has already been described above. Reading for general purposes relates to general interest reading and dealing with texts we encounter every day, so it has much in common with survival reading which has also been detailed earlier. Reading for specific purposes is closely connected with ESP and EAP. It is usually related to particular content areas and perceived as gaining professional knowledge rather than skill practice (65 – 69).

In real life, reading is always meaning based. We read with a certain purpose in mind and want to reach some goal. Reading for its own sake hardly ever happens after we have reached an acceptable level of fluency and reading proficiency, except for reading for pleasure. Thus, when teaching reading and developing reading skills, teachers should support reading for authentic reasons and promote extensive reading outside the classroom. The issues of extensive and intensive reading will be dealt with later. More emphasis, however, will be put on intensive reading, because the primary concern of this thesis is developing reading skills for the Maturita exam.

1.1.3. Reading and Other Language Skills

Language skills can be divided into two major groups: receptive and productive skills. Receptive, or passive, skills include reading and listening; speaking and writing are referred to as productive, or alternatively, active skills. Individual skills hardly ever occur in isolation as language users frequently employ their combination at the same time (Harmer 16 – 17). In other words, language skills are interrelated and it is widely assumed that we cannot easily separate speaking from listening and reading from writing. For example, we are frequently involved in face-to-face conversation alternating between listening and speaking or making notes simultaneously. It is therefore important to bear in mind that there is always some kind of interaction between the basic skills.

In the case of reading and writing we talk about an imaginary dialogue between the writer and reader since texts are typically written with the future reader in mind. The writer expects the reader to possess relevant background knowledge and situational schemata and to be able to utilise them in order to extract the meaning from the lines. Furthermore, the text should be clear and explicit enough and structured logically to facilitate reading comprehension. The reader, on the other hand, is required to approach the text flexibly and adopt an active attitude, working out the meaning of the text through a large number of reading skills and strategies (Wallace 43 – 44).

Concerning language learning, textual material is frequently used as a basis for writing development. Thus, texts can serve as both reading and writing practice. Furthermore, it is generally known that exposure to written material leads to language acquisition which may indirectly result in an improvement in speaking or listening.

1.1.4. Reading in a Foreign Language

Indisputably, there is a relationship between first and foreign language reading and much of what has been said concerns to a large extent both. At the same time, as Hudson claims, a number of differences can be found (60). Although the author deals primarily with second language reading, some of the basic principles apply to foreign language reading as well.

Firstly, most foreign language readers are already literate in their mother tongue and possess “pre-existing reading skills”. These can affect their perspective of reading and thus “either assist or interfere” in foreign language reading. However, being a good first language reader does not necessarily mean the same for foreign language reading. Secondly, reading in one’s mother tongue is typically preceded by the mastery of speaking. In the case of foreign languages, learners normally begin reading without being able to express themselves in the target language. Thus the acquisition of foreign language reading skills is likely to be very different, as readers do not possess sufficient knowledge about the vocabulary and grammar of the target language. Thirdly, child first language readers and adult foreign language readers demonstrate a significant cognitive difference. Factors such as life experience, motivation and purpose in learning play a very important role (Hudson 60).

Furthermore, Hedge points out the significance of schematic and language knowledge for successful foreign language reading. Schemata represent pre-existing mental images of typical situations. This background knowledge can facilitate reading comprehension if it matches the textual information. It is therefore advantageous to activate prior knowledge before reading as this can improve understanding. Language knowledge, on the other hand, allows readers to process the text quickly and efficiently and it is normally called on automatically in the mother tongue. With regard to foreign language reading, learners frequently struggle with unfamiliar aspects of the target language, especially vocabulary and grammar. In order to improve reading comprehension, Hedge suggests taking the following steps: promoting extensive reading to expand vocabulary and awareness of rhetorical organization and providing sufficient practice in reading itself, but also in “analytic activities which draw students’ attention explicitly to some linguistic features of texts” (190 – 194).

It is important to keep in mind that despite sharing many similarities, first and foreign language reading are different and need to be approached in different ways. Success in reading in one's mother tongue does not predetermine the reader to succeed when completing a reading task in a foreign language. On the contrary, research has shown that limited exposure to the target language results in problems with reading. Thus, the reading teachers' task is to prevent learners from failure and frustration through the use of modified reading material or texts whose difficulty would match readers' level of attainment (Hudson 74). At the same time, readers need to encounter authentic texts in order to gain a higher degree of autonomy once they leave the language classroom.

To sum up, readers should have enough opportunities to practice and develop their reading skills through working with various types of texts and completing different reading tasks. It is also necessary to provide essential reading instruction and show learners how to work with written material effectively, using a wide range of reading skills and strategies.

1.1.5. Reading Processes

There are a number of models and theories trying to explain the nature of reading processes, the way readers approach, process and decode information in writing. Many theories concerning foreign/second language reading have evolved from research findings on first language reading and they keep changing over time. Undoubtedly, it is impossible to propose a single universal model that would be applicable to all reading processes in all contexts (Hudson 31).

Generally, models of reading processes can be divided into two categories: bottom-up models and top-down models. Additionally, many current researchers adhere to the interactive model, which blends both the bottom-up and top-down approach (Hudson 33).

“Bottom-up approaches ... assume that a reader constructs the meaning from letters, words, phrases, clauses, and sentences by processing the text into phonemic units that represent lexical meaning, and then builds meaning in a linear manner” (Hudson 33). These models depend primarily on the textual information and “emphasize ... lower level reading processes” (Anderson 2). As Hudson points out, “the key features here are the phoneme – grapheme correspondence notions and the information processing view of reconstructing the existing message” (34).

In contrast to bottom-up models, top-down models “assume that a reader approaches a text with conceptualization above the textual level already in operation and then works down to the text itself. The reader makes continually changing hypotheses about the incoming information ...” and “... applies background knowledge ... in order to create meaning that is ... sensible.” In other words, the reading process is seen as either confirming or rejecting predictions about the text message based on existing schemata (Hudson 33 – 34).

Interactive approaches combine elements of both models mentioned above. Reading is thus seen as “involving the application of higher order mental processes and background knowledge as well as features of the text itself” which means that lower-level skills are applied automatically and accompanied by text, context and background knowledge interaction (Hudson 34 – 39).

As Anderson notes, the understanding of reading processes allows the teacher to adjust their teaching accordingly and thus help learners improve their reading skills (2).

1.2. Reading Skills and Strategies

The distinction between reading skills and strategies is not clear and every author engaged in foreign/second language reading uses the terms in a slightly different way since they partially overlap.

Hudson quotes a number of definitions provided by different researchers. Richards, Platt and Weber see language skills as being “the mode or manner in which language is used.” Harris and Hodges go into more detail, defining skills as “an acquired ability to perform well; proficiency.” Another definition provided by Proctor and Dutta encompasses the view of skills as “goal-directed, well organized behaviour that is acquired through practice and performed with economy of effort” (78).

Concerning strategies, Wellman asserts that: “To be a strategy, the means must be employed deliberately, with some awareness, in order to produce or influence the goal” (qtd. in Hudson 105). A similar definition is provided by Winograd and Hare who define strategies as “deliberate actions that learners select and control to achieve desired goals and objectives” (qtd. in Anderson 72). In contrast Richards, Platt and Weber perceive strategies as “procedures used in learning, thinking, etc. which serve as a way of reaching a goal. In language learning, ... strategies ... are those conscious or

unconscious processes which language learners make use of in learning and using a language” (qtd. in Hudson 105). This thesis follows the distinction provided by Paris, Wasik and Turner. They reduce the ambiguity and overlap of the terms by stating, that:

Skills refer to information-processing techniques that are automatic, whether at the level of recognizing phoneme-grapheme correspondence or summarizing a story. Skills are applied to text unconsciously for many reasons including expertise, repeated practice, compliance with directions, luck and naïve use. In contrast, strategies are actions selected deliberately to achieve particular goals. An emerging skill can become a strategy when it is used intentionally. Likewise, a strategy can ‘go underground’ ... and become a skill. Indeed, strategies are more efficient and developmentally advanced when they become generated and applied automatically as skills (Paris et al qtd. in Hudson 106).

In other words, a skill is seen as a kind of proficiency or ability which is called on automatically, whereas strategy is perceived as intentional application of a certain reading technique. Depending on the context the same action can be both skill and strategy. The following text, however, deals primarily with reading skills as the main focus of this thesis is on their development in secondary school students. The main aim is to cultivate existing reading skills through sufficient practice and provide strategy instruction where skills are absent. Strategic behaviour should become automatic and thus transform into a skill with time.

Since there are a number of reading skills, these are grouped into several categories. With regard to terminology, differences can be found in the works of different authors. Nevertheless, their individual approaches demonstrate many similarities and address the same issues. The following text adheres to the categories of reading skills found in Nuttall with reference to other authors. These categories are: increasing and varying reading speed, utilizing non-text information, word attack skills and text attack skills. Each of the groups is dealt with separately and in more detail in the following chapters.

1.2.1. Increasing and Varying Reading Speed

Undoubtedly, there is a link between reading speed and comprehension. When readers understand a piece of text, they are likely to proceed much faster and read with apparent ease. At the same time, when reading becomes automatic, there is greater cognitive capacity left for comprehension (Anderson 54). Moreover, this success is a great motivation factor for further reading and thus it might contribute to the skill improvement through interest in extensive reading outside the classroom.

On the other hand, a poor reader is likely to be slower and struggle to gain understanding (Nuttall 33). Failure often frustrates and demotivates unsuccessful readers and this frequently results in their negative attitude and general dislike of reading, because it is seen as a rather draining and time-consuming activity. Many poor readers then find themselves in a vicious circle, avoiding reading practice and preventing themselves from having opportunities to improve (Nuttall qtd. in Anderson 59). Thus it is vitally important to provide reading practice focused not only on understanding, but also on increasing reading speed.

As Nuttall points out, encouraging proper reading habits means providing students with a considerable amount of practice with easy texts (33). The advantages are obvious. Firstly, even poor readers experience success when the text used is below their level. Secondly, the sense of achievement increases their motivation. Furthermore, readers can gain necessary flexibility and learn how to approach different types of texts. This is particularly advantageous in the case of exam training, since learners become used to the task formats and develop appropriate reading techniques. Finally, extensive reading practice gives readers the opportunity to dispose of faulty reading habits, such as finger pointing or reading aloud that, if retained, usually slow the reading process as well (Nuttall 37 – 38).

There are various ways of judging the difficulty of a particular text. The easiest way is to use a text taken from a graded book or a textbook intended for the level in question. Concerning texts from other sources, such as the Internet, a valuable tool called *Oxford 3000 Text Checker* is available online¹. The title refers to the 3000 most common English words that are seen as important and useful and can be found in different types of text and in various contexts. To check the level of a text, the user

¹ For more information see
<http://www.oup.com/elt/catalogue/teachersites/oald7/oxford_3000/oxford_3000_profiler?cc=global>

only types or pastes it into the submit box. Those words that are not part of the Oxford 3000 are highlighted in red. The percentage of words that are included in the Oxford 3000 is also given. A typical lower-intermediate level text would include close to 100% of keywords, an upper-intermediate text, 90 – 95% and an advanced text, 75 – 90% (“The Oxford 3000” n.d.). Thus it is rather easy to judge the level and suitability of a text.

Concerning the reading speed itself, various authors differ in their opinions on what reading rate is acceptable. Generally, the average suggested is at least 200 words per minute at 70% comprehension, since rapid reading with no understanding is obviously not satisfactory (Anderson 62).

1.2.1.1. Skimming and Scanning

Skimming and scanning represent two of the most important reading techniques candidates need to master in order to pass the new Maturita exam successfully. Both of them are frequently used in our everyday lives and it is advantageous to be able to use them where suitable.

Skimming can be defined as quick reading of a text in order to get a general overview of its message and organization. In other words, it is reading for gist (Nuttall 34). In real life we often skim written material, either to see if it contains relevant information, or simply to know roughly what it is about. Reading every text we come across word by word would be ineffective and somewhat time-consuming. Moreover, it is often necessary to read a large amount of material. In such cases, the faster the reading, the better. The same applies to language testing, since there is typically a limited amount of time allotted. There are many strategies that can be used when skimming. Nuttall mentions glancing through chapter headings, subtitles and beginnings and ends of paragraphs. She also stresses the need for speed and suggests setting a time limit to encourage rapid reading (34 – 40).

The term scanning, on the other hand, means rapid glancing through a piece of text in order to find a specific piece of information while ignoring the irrelevant material. It refers to picking out the details that are of importance to the reader. These are typically expressed in single words rather than whole sentences (Nuttall 34 – 40). In authentic life situations, we frequently employ scanning when looking up a phone number in Yellow Pages or a word in a dictionary. Obviously, we know what we are looking for in advance. Concerning reading skills testing, Harmer points out that it is

a common practice to put questions before the text to be scanned in order to encourage candidates to read the text in the required way (193). Generally, it is a good practice to skim the text first to get a brief overview of its structure and content and only then scan it for the information needed (“Reading Strategies”).

Both skimming and scanning are called on automatically when reading in mother tongue but learners often fail to employ them when reading in a foreign language, limiting themselves to careful intensive reading only. Therefore it may be beneficial to raise learners’ awareness of different types of reading skills and show them that the same reading technique applies to the same types of text with no reference to language. In other words, the transfer of reading techniques from one language to another is possible. It is also important to stress that we frequently read superficially, not paying attention to every single word, because there is simply no need to understand everything. Practice in skimming and scanning should not only improve learners’ reading speed but also reduce their discomfort felt with limited comprehension.

1.2.1.2. Reading for Detailed Comprehension

Reading for detailed information relates to close and careful reading whose aim is to extract a particular piece of information. This type of reading requires sufficient understanding of a text. When compared to skimming and scanning, it is considerably slower, but it plays an important role among the reading skills an experienced reader should master. In language testing situations, candidates are often required to summarize the writer’s ideas and understand their feelings, attitudes or opinions (Harmer 184). To perform well, candidates need to interpret the text adequately and be able to distinguish between the main and secondary points and understand facts and comments. Factors such as variety of language and vocabulary used or level of formality play a significant role and readers should be sensitised to their importance (“Reading Strategies”)

1.2.2. Utilizing Non-Text Information

The text itself is definitely the main source of information for the reader. However, a number of details can be obtained when looking at a text from a different perspective. Nuttall mentions three main sources of non-text information: graphic conventions, reference apparatus and non-verbal information (42).

Graphic conventions include spacing, indentation, layout, type, punctuation and use of symbols. All these aspects are likely to cause problems to unskilled readers, especially if they come from a language background where the Latin alphabet is not used. Since this thesis deals with Czech secondary school learners of English, graphic conventions should not pose major problems. However, it is worth spending time on discussing the individual areas with students to make sure they fully understand their significance (Nuttall 42 – 47).

Like the previous section, reference apparatus is not of significant value regarding the focus of this thesis. It refers to textual features such as the title, blurb, information about the author, summary, index or tables and lists of various kinds typically appearing in books. All these can influence and facilitate the reader's understanding of a text (Nuttall 47 – 52). However, except for the title that can be used for predicting the content of the text, none of the items normally occur in Maturita reading tasks.

The term non-verbal information includes items such as pictures, charts, tables, diagrams, maps, plans and graphs. In fact, some of the items do contain language, but as Nuttall clarifies, the term refers to “all kinds of information that accompany a text but are not themselves textual” (52). When talking about reading skills development, all these might be useful for activating background knowledge or predicting content of a text. They may also serve as a tool for checking reading comprehension, for example when matching pictures to individual paragraphs of a text. In either case, non-verbal information plays an important role in reading comprehension since “verbal and non-verbal information frequently support each other” (Nuttall 52).

When examining textbooks and materials intended for reading skills development, the importance of non-text information is obvious. Readers are trained in making use of clues as they frequently have their attention drawn to them prior to reading, predicting the content and message of the text on the basis of the title and illustrations. It also serves as a stimulus for activating background knowledge.

1.2.3. Word-Attack Skills

There is undoubtedly a link between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension and it is widely assumed that a large vocabulary facilitates understanding of a text. At the same time, possessing an extensive vocabulary does not necessarily mean being able to read effectively (Anderson 21).

Ur mentions six key aspects of vocabulary knowledge. These are: form, grammar, collocation, aspects of meaning (denotation, connotation, appropriateness), meaning relationships and word formation (60 – 62). It is clear that knowing a word means not only the ability to produce/recognise its written and spoken form, but also mastery of its use in various contexts and situations. Furthermore, as Hudson points out, “there is a close relationship between lexical knowledge and world knowledge” which means that learners need to possess appropriate cultural schemata in order to understand (228).

Unfortunately, vocabulary development is a long-term process whose results are dependent on various factors ranging from individual learning styles to the amount of reading practice given. Vocabulary development should therefore become an integral part of any language course. Simultaneously, learners should receive basic instruction in word-attack skills to be able to deal with unfamiliar words and gain understanding of a text even when experiencing difficulties.

As Nuttall points out, the term “word-attack skills” refers to lexical items rather than single words but it is commonly used among teachers and researchers (66). Following her distinction, word-attack skills usually make use of: phonics, structural clues, morphological information and context. They also include gaining awareness of different types of vocabulary and the ability to ignore difficult words. Each of these aspects is dealt with below. Concerning phonics, Nuttall argues it is not of much use to the foreign language learner, since working out the pronunciation of an unknown word hardly ever helps understanding (66). This thesis will therefore no longer focus on the use of phonics.

1.2.3.1. Structural and Morphological Information

Nuttall states that structural clues can help the reader “establish the type (grammatical category) of word represented by the new item.” This can further assist the reader in predicting the kind of meaning. It is generally helpful to focus attention on what precedes and follows the unknown item and use this information to build up understanding (66 – 67). When combined with other word-attack skills, structural clues can certainly contribute to revealing the meaning of the item.

Concerning morphology, knowing the meaning of affixes can greatly improve readers' understanding of unfamiliar vocabulary. To use morphological information effectively, readers need to be able to "recognize the parts of a word, learn the meaning of prefixes and roots and ... be able to combine prefixes and roots to create new words" (Nation qtd. in Anderson 27). However, as Nuttall notes, detailed instruction is not suitable unless students have reached "a substantial vocabulary to provide other examples of the same affix and a stock of bases" (68). Moreover, there are a vast number of prefixes and suffixes in English and learners would undoubtedly feel overwhelmed if presented with an exhaustible list intended for memorizing. To avoid frustration and provide meaningful instruction, it is more suitable to tackle the affixes step by step as they appear in language material dealt with in lessons or focus on only a small number of affixes at one time when working on vocabulary development.

To sum up, both structural and morphological information can provide valuable clues to decoding the meaning of a word and when combined, they certainly represent effective tools supporting comprehension.

1.2.3.2. Inference from Context

Deducing meaning from context is another key sub-skill important for reading comprehension. Inference can be defined as the process of deriving conclusions and creating a meaning from text. This brings us back to the concept of reading as an active process that requires the reader to be involved in the interaction with a text in order to extract the message.

When experiencing problems with vocabulary, most learners tend to either ask someone to explain the meaning or consult a dictionary. Unfortunately, learners frequently feel they need to understand every single word in a text, even though there is no reason for such behaviour. Nuttall argues that in fact, too much attention to vocabulary can influence one's reading habits in a rather negative way, resulting in being a less effective reader, since constant interruptions slow down the reading. Moreover, in real life we do not always have access to a dictionary when we need it. It is therefore expedient to train learners in making inferences based on the context and thus allow them to become more independent readers (Nuttall 69).

Inferring meaning is a skill all language users possess and widely use in their mother tongue. Indeed, most of our active L1 vocabulary was acquired this way. It is therefore natural and students should be encouraged to develop this ability in a foreign language as well, as it is a valuable aid to understanding (Nuttall 70). At the same time, it is important to be aware of the disadvantages connected with the use of this word-attack skill. Hulstijn claims that some reading instruction encouraging inferring:

1. may entice the reader to believe that the meaning of all unknown words may be inferred from context when in fact they cannot;
2. encourages an uncritical impulsive guessing behaviour on the part of the reader as inferences are made;
3. fails to encourage the reader to check the correctness of their inferences if they are in doubt (qtd. in Hudson 250).

Thus it is necessary to make learners aware of the fact that even though deducing meaning from context is an effective skill, it is not always absolutely reliable since it might lead to incorrect conclusions. Rather than limiting learners to mere guessing only, it might be beneficial to find a balance between using word-attack skills and a dictionary.

Concerning instruction of deducing the meaning from context, Clarke and Nation suggest the following steps readers should follow: Firstly, examine the unknown word in order to decide its part of speech. Secondly, examine the clause or sentence containing the unknown word, with particular focus on the lexical items preceding and following it. Thirdly, examine the relationship between the clause or sentence containing the unknown word and the rest of the text in the paragraph, focusing on conjunctions, reference words and punctuation. Then try to guess the meaning of the unknown word. Finally, check your understanding. If the parts of the speech of the unknown word and your guess match and your guess makes sense, you are probably correct. Use morphological information to check if the meaning of the unknown word corresponds with the meaning of your guess (qtd. in Anderson 26 – 27).

However, as has already been mentioned, learners should know that there is a danger of making an incorrect guess that would lead to misunderstanding. Moreover, as it is not always necessary to understand all the words that appear in the reading passage, learners should avoid overusing this skill.

1.2.3.3. Other Word-Attack Skills

Apart from the skills mentioned above, there are other aspects concerning vocabulary that learners should know in order to become more fluent readers. Firstly, they should be aware of the fact that they possess two kinds of vocabulary: active and passive. Active vocabulary refers to the stock of words and lexical items the language learner uses productively when speaking or writing. Passive vocabulary, on the other hand, represents such expressions the learner understands in context, but cannot use actively. Regarding reading comprehension, it is definitely not necessary to have active knowledge of all words appearing in a reading passage, providing they are understood when encountered in a text (Nuttall 74).

Secondly, learners should develop the ability to distinguish between words that need to be understood and words that can be safely ignored. They should learn that they do not need to understand everything to comprehend the text as a whole. Moreover, the unknown item may often play a minor role in conveying the message and thus it may not be worth the effort needed to reveal its meaning using word-attack skills (Nuttall 75).

To sum up, word-attack skills represent a group of techniques important for tackling unknown words and expressions successfully. They are invaluable when encountering lexical items for the first time and language learners should be trained to acquire them. In language testing situations, vocabulary demands typically correspond with the level learners have attained. However, all foreign language learners are likely to meet new words outside the classroom and word-attack skills instruction and practice will help them to become autonomous and more independent in using the target language.

1.2.4. Text-Attack Skills

The term “text-attack skills” refers to skills readers need in order to comprehend a text and extract the meaning. Nuttall mentions four types of meaning: conceptual meaning, referring to the meaning of a word in isolation; propositional meaning, related to the meaning of a sentence outside the context; contextual meaning, describing the meaning of a sentence within a particular context and finally pragmatic meaning, connected with the users of the language themselves (80 – 81). Apparently, the concept of meaning is very wide and thus it is often difficult to understand a text exactly the way it was originally written. Training in text-attack skills might certainly be helpful in

discovering and extracting the message from a piece of writing. However, because this thesis focuses on reading skills development for the new Maturita exam with particular focus on B1 level secondary school students, not all text-attack skills are dealt with below. The reasons justifying such treatment of the topic are as follows: Firstly, students' English proficiency is not sufficient to deal with all text-attack skills. Secondly, the basic level of the new Maturita exam should correspond with students' command of the language and thus the texts used in the reading paper will be simplified or modified to be accessible to B1 level learners of English.

The following text, therefore, provides only limited information about selected text-attack skills. It briefly outlines the problems related to cohesion and problems beyond the plain sense, touching on basic facts about each of the areas.

1.2.4.1. Cohesion Related Problems

Cohesion can be defined as “the semantic and formal relations between elements of a discourse which are expressed in that the interpretation of the meaning of one element in the discourse is dependent on that of another.” Cohesion helps to organise the text in a logical way and guides the reader through the text as it is usually easily recognised. (Navrátilová 29). Unless problematic, readers scarcely realise its significance and function in the text. The following paragraphs briefly describe cohesive devices and discourse markers, the elements readers should be able to interpret in order to understand a piece of writing.

According to Nuttall, cohesive devices most relevant to foreign language readers include reference, substitution, ellipsis and lexical items (89). At intermediate level, learners should already be able to identify referring expressions such as pronouns and comparatives. They should also know how to deal with substitution and ellipsis and interpret lexical cohesion, but only to an extent corresponding with their level. However, tackling the problems as they occur is more beneficial than explicit and detailed instruction focused on all possible ambiguities than might arise. Intermediate level learners' command of English is not good enough and thus it would most probably result in confusion rather than reading improvement.

Concerning discourse markers, these can be defined as expressions that “signal the relationships between different parts of the discourse and often indicate the functional value of the sentence in which they occur” (Nuttall 95). These words and phrases help to hold the text together and create logical links between its parts.

Following Nuttall's interpretation, discourse markers relevant to foreign language readers include markers signalling: the sequence of events (e.g. first, then, the following day), discourse organization (e.g. namely, to resume, to sum up) and the writer's point of view (e.g. furthermore, actually, consequently) (95 – 98). As with cohesive devices, the number of discourse markers English learners at B1 level are familiar with is limited and thus it is more advantageous to deal with them in context rather than providing exhaustive lists intended for memorizing.

To sum up, intermediate level learners of English should be aware of the existence of both cohesive devices and discourse markers. At the same time it is important to bear in mind that the level of their English is limited and too detailed information concerning this issue would be of little use since, in the classroom settings, B1 level learners typically deal with simplified material. The same applies to language testing situations, in our case the new Maturita exam reading paper.

1.2.4.2. Problems beyond the Plain Sense

As Nuttall points out, the reader may experience difficulties interpreting the text as a whole, even when the meaning of individual sentences has been understood (83). There are various problems that go beyond the plain sense of a sentence. These are connected with the ability to recognize functional value, trace and interpret rhetorical organization, recognize the presuppositions underlying the text, recognize implications and make inferences and predictions. Similarly to the skills described in the previous chapter, the skills required for the successful tackling of these problems are best developed when dealing with texts. Even though all skills mentioned above are important for comprehension, the following lines touch upon the skills that are most relevant to an intermediate level reader taking the new Maturita exam in English. These are: interpreting rhetorical organization, recognizing implications and making inferences and predictions.

Concerning rhetorical organization of a text, it is beneficial to show learners that texts are usually well organised and logically structured and correspond with the writer's attitudes, intentions and purposes of writing. They should also be aware of the significance of paragraphing and text organization and utilize this knowledge to identify the main and secondary ideas and comprehend the text. Various activities raising awareness of rhetorical organization can be introduced, most of them based on ordering paragraphs into texts or sentences into paragraphs (Nuttall 107 – 111).

Recognizing implications and making inferences are often considered advanced skills and thus neglected in comprehension courses. However, they are easy to improve, providing a sufficient amount of practice is given. Moreover, readers frequently rely on inferences when reading in their mother tongue, meaning that the skill is not new to them. Generally, it is important to read carefully and take the whole context into consideration in order to make sense of the reading passage (Nuttall 117 – 118). It is also helpful to activate background knowledge prior to reading to sensitize readers to information that the writer implies. This is connected to the art of prediction.

Since people often follow similar thinking patterns, it is possible to make predictions about the information a particular text contains (Nuttall 120). These are based both on textual information and the reader's previous experience, interests, assumptions about the world and existing cultural schemata. Generally, predictions may or may not match the actual content of the text and thus may either facilitate or impede reading comprehension (Hudson 142 – 145)

1.3. Intensive and Extensive Reading

Intensive and extensive reading represent two contrastive approaches to reading practice. Intensive reading is typical for the language classroom and involves reading texts for detailed comprehension. It is normally accompanied by a number of tasks to be completed. The main aim is to understand the text as much as possible (Scrivener 188). Intensive reading activities often include skimming and scanning and require the reader to use a wide range of skills that have already been discussed in earlier chapters. Intensive reading thus seems more relevant to the topic of this thesis because it matches the tasks readers are required to complete when taking the new Maturita exam reading test.

Extensive reading, on the other hand, involves learners reading texts for pleasure and entertainment. The main focus is general understanding rather than attention to details. As a classroom activity, it is often overlooked even though it brings many advantages to the reader. Extensive reading practice leads to fluency and vocabulary development and thus it improves reading comprehension and promotes confidence in the language (Scrivener 188). Unfortunately, it is often considered to be time consuming and many teachers feel awkward about silent reading in class. Moreover, it

requires access to books or other reading material written in the target language and suitable for extensive reading practice. Nevertheless, it is definitely worth encouraging, because it contributes to reading fluency and increases understanding.

Teachers should, ideally, find a balance between both intensive and extensive reading practice in order to prepare students for language testing situations and provide opportunities for reading for pleasure in the target language inside and outside the classroom.

1.4. Maturita Exam

The following chapters of this thesis give detailed information about the Maturita exam, comparing its current and forthcoming form and organization. They deal primarily with the examination in the English language, focusing mainly on the reading paper, providing details about its parts, task types, requirements and assessment.

Depending on the type of secondary school, students can take different kinds of leaving exam certifying the level of education achieved. The Maturita exam represents a prevalent type of exam taken at the end of secondary education in the Czech Republic. As it is both a prerequisite for college or university admission and a common requirement of most employers, it is taken by the majority of students leaving secondary schools.

The Czech term “maturita” comes from the Latin word “maturitas” meaning “ripeness” or “maturity” (*Latinlexicon*). Probably due to its origin and meaning, the term is widely used to refer to the final exams young adults take at the end of secondary education. As it is typically taken at the age of 18 or 19, it is associated with the notion of maturity or adulthood and thus considered the first step in accepting the responsibility for one’s own life and actions. Moreover, students frequently finish their schooling at this point and enter the world of work. The term can be found in many languages across the European continent and it is understood even by English native speakers.

Generally, there is a tendency to use the Czech term “Maturita” to refer to the secondary school-leaving examination with neither translation nor explanation given. This thesis will therefore adhere to this use of the term as well.

1.5. Form and Organization of the Maturita Exam

The form and organization of the Maturita exam is governed by several legal documents adopted by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic (further referred to as the “Ministry of Education”). Since the present and the new Maturita exam differ in many respects, each of the forms is dealt with and discussed separately.

1.5.1. The Current Maturita Exam

The structure and organization of the Maturita exam differs according to the specific type of secondary school. Generally, it is divided into four separate exams, including an exam in the Czech language and three other exams in varying subjects according to the school’s curriculum. As this thesis deals with the Maturita exam at specialized secondary schools, a brief description is given below.

At specialized secondary schools, the Maturita exam usually consists of the following parts: an exam in the Czech language, an exam in an optional subject chosen by the candidate and a theoretical and practical exam in specialized subjects (*Notice No. 442/1991 Coll. §9*). Unlike the exam in the Czech language, the exam in a foreign language is not currently a compulsory part of the examination. Furthermore, if the exam in a foreign language does take place, it rarely tests candidates’ knowledge in a complex way as most schools administer the oral form of the exam only.

1.5.2. The New Maturita Exam

The New Maturita exam is divided into two parts: the common part and the profile part. The common part, managed by the Centre for Testing the Results of Education (further referred to as CERMAT) and the Ministry of Education, will be the same for all schools. It will include the following compulsory exams: an exam in the Czech language, an exam in a foreign language according to the candidate’s choice, and an exam in a compulsory-optional subject which might be either chosen by the candidate or further specified by the headmaster. (*Act No. 561/2004 Coll. §78*). The profile part of the exam is entirely under the authority of individual schools, allowing space for incorporating requirements of their own. It will consist of either two or three compulsory exams, depending on the Framework Educational Programme for

the field in question. The selection of subjects for the compulsory examination will again be specified by the headmaster (*Act No. 561/2004 Coll. §79*). The main aim of the incoming changes in the form and organization of the Maturita exam is to increase the objectivity, comparability and reliability of the examination results, restore its former prestige and provide an assessment tool which would be of relevance to universities and employers (“Why the New Maturita Exam?”).

1.6. Maturita Exam in English

Since the present and the incoming Maturita exam in a foreign language differ significantly in many respects, the following lines provide a more detailed description of the nature of the changes that are to come concerning the exam in the English language.

1.6.1. The Current Maturita Exam in English

At present the Maturita exam in English varies from school to school. However, some generalizations can be made on the grounds of relevant legislative documents adopted by the Ministry of Education. Depending on the school and candidates’ choice, the exam in English may or may not be held. It commonly takes the form of an oral exam, less frequently preceded by a written part whose form and content is specified by the headmaster. The oral exam consists of twenty-five to thirty conversation topics, one of which is chosen by the students fifteen minutes prior to the examination itself. After the fifteen-minute preparation, the candidate speaks on the topic in front of the committee for about a quarter of an hour (*Notice No. 442/1991 Coll. §9*).

1.6.2. The New Maturita Exam in English

Compared with its current form, the new Maturita exam represents a much more complex way of testing candidates’ language use and abilities. The exam consists of three parts that focus on receptive, productive and interactive skills, assessing candidates’ reading, listening, writing and speaking. The incoming form of the Maturita exam is generally considered to be more challenging than its present form. It is also expected to provide a clearer and more reliable picture of candidates’ command of the target language.

Candidates taking the exam are entitled to choose from two levels of difficulty: the basic level corresponding to the B1 level of the CEFR level, and the higher level corresponding to the B2 level of the CEFR. The requirements for the new Maturita exam are defined by means of specific aims and detailed in the catalogues of requirements, namely *Katalog požadavků zkoušek společné části maturitní zkoušky: Anglický jazyk – základní úroveň obtížnosti* [*The Catalogue of Requirements for Exams of the Common Part of the Maturita Exam: English Language – basic level*] (further referred to as ‘The Catalogue of Requirements’) and *Katalog požadavků zkoušek společné části maturitní zkoušky: Anglický jazyk – vyšší úroveň obtížnosti* [*The Catalogue of Requirements for Exams of the Common Part of the Maturita Exam: English Language – higher level*], both from 2008.

As far as assessment is concerned, candidates need to reach the cut-off score in each part of the examination in order to pass it successfully. Failure in one of the individual parts, either oral or written, means failing the whole Maturita exam. Concerning assessment of individual parts, the responsibility will be shared by CERMAT and the school where candidates actually take the exam.

Both levels of the Maturita exam in English share several similar features in their form, organization and assessment, differing in requirements predetermined by the level in question. This thesis, however, deals only with the basic level exam corresponding to the B1 level of the CEFR. In the first year, the majority of students are expected to avoid taking the risk of failing the higher level exam, and thus the whole Maturita exam, by choosing the basic level examination. Those interested in the B2 level Maturita in English will have an opportunity to sit it optionally. In other words, candidates will be allowed to take the exam in English (or other foreign language) at both levels, one of them compulsorily and the other optionally. If they fail the optional exam, the results of the compulsory part will not be affected in any way. Nevertheless, this policy only applies to the first year of testing and it will not be possible to take two exams in the same subject from 2012 on.

Since this thesis focuses mainly on secondary school students reading development for exam practice, the following chapters provide more detailed information concerning the reading paper which is a part of the new Maturita exam, more precisely its basic level.

1.7. Reading Paper

As has been already mentioned, the incoming Maturita exam consists of three parts: the didactic test, the oral part and the written part. The didactic test examines candidates' receptive skills and comprises reading and listening sub-tests. Generally, the didactic test has a number of advantages: it eliminates the element of subjectivity, allows comparison and requires a reasonable amount of time to administer and assess. Moreover, it possesses a number of qualities such as objectivity, reliability and validity and thus it is seen as a suitable tool for testing candidates' reading skills. ("Didactic Tests").

The following chapters deal with the reading sub-test itself, describing its most significant aspects, namely the types of texts and tasks employed by the paper, requirements and assessment.

1.7.1. Text Types

Candidates are expected to be able to deal with texts of a factual nature and understand texts written in non-fictional, artistic and journalistic style, for example: announcements, recipes, offers, programmes, reviews, narratives, letters and so on. Many texts appearing in the reading paper are drawn from the real world and, if necessary, adapted to suit the level of the examination. The main sources of reading material are electronic media such as websites and web pages, online newspapers and magazines, advertising material and brochures, but also street signs, public notices and so forth. The length of texts is restricted to one page. Nevertheless, shorter texts (from about 100 to 250 words) prevail. (*The Catalogue of Requirements 7*)

Regarding the language of the texts, it should reflect the everyday vocabulary and grammar structures candidates might encounter in real life situations. These, however, should respect the level of the examination. Unfamiliar words and expressions above the level can occur only to a limited extent, especially when testing candidates' ability to infer meaning of an unknown word from its context or when they do not affect completing the task. The Czech translation of some words can be provided in footnotes, because candidates are not allowed to use dictionaries when taking the reading test (*The Catalogue of Requirements 7*).

1.7.2. Task Types

The basic level examination provides the task instructions in the mother tongue, ensuring candidates will understand what they are expected to do. The paper itself consists of five parts. Investigating relevant documents does not provide much information about the nature of the tasks introduced by the reading paper. Nevertheless, some generalisations can be based on them. Following the order of occurrence in *The Catalogue of Requirements* and the sample reading paper issued by CERMAT in 2008, the tasks are as follows:

Part 1 tests candidates' understanding of several very short discrete texts such as notices, communicative messages, very short anecdotes, pieces of news and so forth. Each text is accompanied by a multiple choice question with four options. The main focus of the task is reading a number of very short adapted-authentic texts for the main message.

Part 2 presents candidates with a longer text assessing reading for detailed comprehension. The text is followed by five multiple choice questions with four options. Answering these questions, candidates will prove their ability to understand not only factual information included in the text, but also the author's opinion, attitude and purpose for writing which is the focus of this part.

Part 3 includes a long factual text, frequently taking the form of a brochure extract, which is preceded by a number of statements about the text. These true/false questions are placed before the text deliberately. The aim here is to encourage candidates to read them first and only then scan the text for specific information while disregarding irrelevant material.

Part 4 consists of two groups of very short texts that should be matched together. The first group of texts provides five descriptions of people, the other group of texts deals with a particular topic like choosing an optional course or purchasing a book. The number of texts in the second group may be larger than the number of texts in the first group. The main focus of this part is reading multiple texts for detailed comprehension.

Part 5 takes the form of a three-option multiple choice cloze following a longer authentic-adapted text with blanks. This part tests candidates' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar and requires understanding the lexical and structural patterns in the text.

Since the reading paper expects the candidates to demonstrate their reading skills through a great variety of adapted-authentic texts, it is important to practice reading as much as possible. In lessons, students should be exposed to texts of different types drawn from authentic sources to become used to such reading material. It is also necessary to place emphasis on skimming and scanning skills, because they play a crucial role in completing some of the reading tasks.

1.7.3. Reading Paper Requirements

The reading test proves candidates' ability to work with a piece of text in terms of understanding its main ideas, thinking critically and making inferences on the basis of information provided in writing. It also requires the candidates to be able to understand the attitudes, intentions, moods and wishes of the writer, distinguish relevant and irrelevant information, read for specific information and show mastery of elementary reading skills such as skimming or scanning (*The Catalogue of Requirements 7*). The total time allotted for testing is 60 minutes, including both performing the tasks and indicating the answers on an answer sheet ("Didactic Tests").

Besides extensive practice with texts of various length and nature, students should also work on improving their reading speed, which is another factor playing a key role in successfully passing the reading paper.

1.7.4. Reading Paper Assessment

As far as assessment of the reading paper is concerned, it will be entirely under the competence of CERMAT. Candidates are required to achieve the cut-off score in order to meet the requirements and pass the examination. However, the cut-off score will comprise the whole didactic test, including both listening and reading sub-tests. The exact pass mark has not been specified yet, but it might range from 22% to 33% in the first years after the launching of the examination (Solařová). Concerning the marking of questions, each correct answer is worth either one or two points. Incorrect answers or no answer are not penalized. The results of the reading paper will contribute 25% towards the total examination grade ("A Foreign Language").

1.8. The New Maturita Exam and PET

The Preliminary English Test² (further referred to as PET) is a general English examination provided by Cambridge ESOL and conducted by the British Council in more than seventy countries worldwide. It is an intermediate level examination corresponding to level B1 of CEFR. The certificate is internationally recognized for business and study purposes (“Preliminary English Test”). Similar to the new Maturita exam in English, PET covers all four language skills testing candidates’ communicative competence and its main focus is on day-to-day use of the language.

When examining relevant materials, it is apparent that PET is an examination with years of tradition that can be relied on. Regarding all three papers, a detailed description of their structure and tasks is given. Both requirements and assessment are stated directly and clearly. Moreover, there is full support for candidates including both learner and teacher resource materials available in print and online, web pages, textbooks and past papers.

On the other hand, the information on the new Maturita exam in English is limited to the Catalogue of Requirements which does not pay much attention to any part of the examination. Neither detailed description nor in-depth information about the assessment of individual papers is given. Concerning test preparation materials, few textbooks focusing on the new Maturita exam are available and only two complete sample tests have been published so far.

1.8.1. PET and Maturita Reading Papers

When compared, the basic level Maturita exam and PET reading papers demonstrate many similarities, despite the fact that the PET examination comprises reading and writing in one paper. Focusing on reading exclusively, the reading papers of both exams consist of five parts that engage in the same types of task. This means that both papers require the candidates to employ the same reading skills and prove their mastery. Marking of reading tasks is also much alike. In the case of both exams the reading part comprises 25% of the total marks for the whole examination. Concerning the time allotted for completing the tasks, the two papers slightly differ.

² Further information concerning the examination and candidate support can be found on <http://www.candidates.cambridgeesol.org/cs/Help_with_exams/General_English/PET>

Whereas the time allotted for the Maturita reading paper is 60 minutes, the PET reading and writing paper should be completed in 90 minutes. Candidates taking the PET examination are therefore expected to spend a little less time on reading than candidates sitting the new Maturita exam.

Since both exams are intended for intermediate level candidates and similar in many respects, past PET papers and other exam support material can be used for the new Maturita exam reading test preparation. This would be advantageous for both candidates and teachers, as they would work with ready-made and carefully graded material that matches the format of the examination.

2. Practical Part

The first, theoretical, part focuses mainly on reading, discussing the theoretical concepts behind individual reading skills. It also provides detailed information about the new Maturita exam, offering a wider context of its present and incoming form and structure and comparing it to the Preliminary English Test. The practical part of this thesis deals with actual reading practice for the new Maturita exam in English. It provides a description of an action research focused on reading skills development in 3rd year secondary school students and conducted in a public business school in Vsetín³.

The beginning of the practical part provides general information about educational action research with particular focus on experiment, the method that was used for gathering data. Further on, the thesis introduces the background of the research and details the whole process of administering the pre-test, experimental intervention and post-test. It comments on the activities used and analyzes and interprets the results of the experiment. Suggestions for teaching practice are offered at the end.

2.1 Educational Action Research

Action research in education can be defined as “a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research” (Ferrance 1). It is also known as participatory research or collaborative inquiry, but all of these terms suggest it is based on using action as a research tool. The whole process can be seen as a cycle that includes planning of a change, taking relevant actions, monitoring the progress and evaluating and reflecting on the results (O’Brien).

Concerning teaching practice, action research is normally carried out by educators or teachers themselves in order to gain insight into the nature of their own practice. The aim is to enhance the professional development of individuals rather than bring universally applicable solutions to educational problems. As such, action research

³ For further details see < <http://www.ssobchodu.cz/> >

is always burdened by subjectivity since it addresses the individual teaching/learning context and arises from a critical approach to personal practice (Waters – Adams).

There are various types of action research depending on the number of participants involved. Thus we can distinguish individual, collaborative, school-wide and district-wide action research (Ferrance 3). The practical part of this thesis, however, deals with individual action research involving a single teacher only.

Similarly, there are a wide number of methods that can be used for gathering data. These are usually considered to be purely qualitative but as Waters-Adams points out, “numerical or statistical information may be of great value to the analysis.” Furthermore, the author suggests employing a triangulation of methods to increase overall reliability. In other words, to obtain a more accurate picture, it is necessary to look at the situation from different angles and use more than one research method. Nevertheless, this thesis employs the method of experiment which is considered to be more demanding than descriptive methods, but generally brings more reliable results.

2.1.1. Experiment

Experiment can be defined as a scientific investigation for the purpose of discovering something unknown or testing a principle or hypothesis which is carried out under controlled conditions. It usually comprises three parts: pre-test, experimental intervention and post-test. Normally, there are also at least two groups of randomly chosen subjects who demonstrate the same qualities: an experimental or treatment group and a control group (Gavora 125 – 133).

There are several different types of experimental design. The one relevant to this thesis is the pre-test/post-test control group design, sometimes referred to as classic controlled experimental design. According to Saint-Germaine, the whole experimental procedure requires the researcher to:

1. randomly assign subjects to treatment or control groups;
2. administer the pre-test to all subjects in both groups;
3. ensure that both groups experience the same conditions, except that in addition the experimental group experiences the treatment;
4. administer the post-test to all subjects in both groups;
5. assess the amount of change on the value of the dependent variable from the pre-test to the post-test for each group separately.

Following these steps allows the researcher to assess the effect of the experimental intervention with a relatively high degree of reliability since it indicates both “the change ... that could be expected to occur without exposure to the treatment” in the case of the control group and “the change ... that could be expected to occur with exposure to the treatment” in the case of the experimental group (Saint-Germaine). Thus, pre-test/post-test comparison represents a valuable tool for discovering and assessing the effects of particular teaching methods and activities through comparison of differences in learning outcomes before and after the experimental treatment.

2.2. Description of the Background

The experiment was carried out among 3rd year students of the Secondary School of Business and Services in Vsetín. It is a public school whose main focus is on specialized subjects such as accounting, economics and management. Concerning foreign languages, students attend German classes twice a week and English classes four times a week. There are a total of 24 students in the class, but both languages are normally taught in two smaller groups of 12. This division was used for assigning students to the experimental and treatment group, so it was not done randomly as the method normally requires since it would have been rather demanding and bring problems with organization. The experiment was therefore conducted as a part of regular English language classes and it took place from December 1st 2009 until March 31st 2010.

The groups of 3rd year students were chosen intentionally for the following reasons: Firstly, they will be the first ones to take the new Maturita exam in English in 2011 and extensive reading practice is therefore beneficial for them. Secondly, they are roughly at the B1 level of CEFR which means that they have already achieved sufficient language proficiency to pass the examination at the basic level. In theory, all students should perform well enough to succeed in the exam. Thirdly, students share many similar qualities, such as roughly the same age, the level of education achieved, the number of English lessons per week and the textbook used. At the same time, they all differ in many individual aspects, e.g.: language learning history, attitudes to English, personal opinions and experience.

2.2.1. Treatment Group

Number of students:	12; (1 boy, 11 girls)
Level:	Intermediate (B1)
Type of school:	Public secondary business school
Age of students:	Teenagers (17 – 18 years old)

Group description: Most of the students have been studying English for about eight years. One of them started learning the language at nursery school which means that she has been exposed to English since early childhood and has continued studying it since then. Her performance, however, is average when compared to the performance of other students in the group. Since these students are the first ones to take the state Maturita exam, they can choose between the examination in English or mathematics. However, the majority of them plan to sit the exam in the English language as they perceive it as being more useful for their future. Two students are also considering taking the advantage of the possibility of sitting the exam in English at both basic and higher level. These girls also plan to study the language at university and thus they are highly motivated. Generally, the group can be described as a mixed ability class including both students who perform exceptionally well and students who frequently struggle to meet the requirements. Nevertheless, all of them are very communicative, cooperative and diligent and thus the language learning environment is very friendly, stimulating and productive. The only real problem is attendance, since many students are often absent from school which naturally influences their general performance in English and other subjects in a rather negative way.

2.2.2. Control Group

Number of students:	12; (2 boys, 10 girls)
Level:	Intermediate (B1)
Type of school:	Public secondary business school
Age of students:	Teenagers (17 – 18 years old)

Group description: Similar to the treatment group, most students from the control group have been studying English for approximately eight years. The teacher perceives the group as very hard-working and generally cooperative, even though brief moments of disruptive behaviour and passivity sometimes appear in the case of one or two students. Most students seem to enjoy their English lessons as they are aware of the importance of being able to communicate in a foreign language nowadays. The majority of them also perform well, but there are two weaker students who often face problems meeting the teacher's requirements. However, they are diligent and one of them even attends extra classes in order to improve in English. Concerning the new Maturita exam, about half of the students are considering sitting the examination in the English language at basic level, the other half plan to take the exam in mathematics. The teacher occasionally organizes activities focusing on tasks typical for the examination in the English language. Nevertheless, they deal mainly with writing where students experience difficulties. The teacher claims that reading practice is being provided as well, but certainly not on a regular basis, nor with particular focus on the Maturita reading tasks. Regarding attendance at classes, the situation is slightly better than in the case of the treatment group, but students are quite often absent as well which is mirrored in their results, especially in specialized subjects.

2.3. Pre-test

As it was necessary to learn about students' strong and weak points with regard to reading skills and strategies application and general reading comprehension, a pre-test was administered at the beginning of the experiment. A sample basic level Maturita reading paper⁴ published by CERMAT was used for this purpose. The test consisted of five parts and comprised tasks typical of the exam. These are two four-option multiple choice exercises, a true / false exercise, descriptions and a short texts matching exercise and a three-option multiple choice cloze. A more detailed description of the tasks is given in the chapters dealing with the Maturita exam and experimental intervention.

Students were allowed 60 minutes to complete the reading and indicate their answers on an answer sheet. General instructions concerning the organization of the pre-test were given in Czech, as well as the written instructions for the individual tasks included in the paper. The test was administered in two successive English lessons that are a normal part of the students' timetable. Students stayed in their regular learning groups and were seated individually in two large classrooms, each at separate desks in order to avoid cheating.

Concerning marking of the pre-test, this adhered to the information stated by *The Catalogue of Requirements* and also the scoring key of the sample test. The test consisted of a total of 41 questions worth either one or two marks. Those tasks requiring more careful reading with detailed comprehension included questions that carried two marks (Parts 1, 2 and 4). The remaining test questions were awarded one mark (Parts 3 and 5). Students could score a maximum of 57 points.

The assessment of students' performance is, in fact, a politically sensitive issue and it is still not entirely clear what score is acceptable and sufficient in order to pass the reading part of the examination. CERMAT has provided information rather scarcely and the exact pass mark has only been implied rather than clearly specified. At present, the minimum acceptable achievement is as low as 33% or even 22%. In fact, setting the cut-off score is a decision that stretches far beyond educational interests. The whole idea of the state Maturita exam has been accompanied by a heated discussion since its inception. It has a number of supporters and objectors among politicians and thus it is still not certain whether the examination will be launched in 2011 or not.

⁴ For the latest version see <<http://www.novamaturita.cz/ilustracni-testy-a-zadani-1404033125.html>>

2.3.1. Treatment Group Results

TREATMENT GROUP							
Students	Part 1 Marks [-] 10	Part 2 Marks [-] 12	Part 3 Marks [-] 10	Part 4 Marks [-] 10	Part 5 Marks [-] 15	Score Marks [-] 57	Percent [%] 100.00
01	6	4	4	6	9	29	50.88
02	0	6	4	0	7	17	29.82
03	4	2	4	0	9	19	33.33
04	6	4	5	0	7	22	38.60
05	6	6	6	4	9	31	54.39
06	10	4	5	0	7	26	45.61
07	6	2	7	8	9	32	56.14
08	2	8	5	8	4	27	47.37
09	2	2	6	10	8	28	49.12
10	6	4	7	0	12	29	50.88
11	8	2	8	10	10	38	66.67
12	8	0	3	2	10	23	40.35
Total	64	44	64	48	101	321	
Average [%]	53.33	30.56	53.33	40.00	56.11	46.93	

Table 1: Pre-test – treatment group results

Table 1 above shows the scores of the students in the treatment group and also summarizes their overall achievement in each of the parts of the reading paper. The highest score achieved was 66.67%, whereas the lowest score was 29.82%. When compared to the cut-off score of 22%, all students would have been able to pass the reading test. However, if the cut-off score were 33%, one of the students would have failed the reading test and thus the whole Maturita exam in English. The average score of the students in the experimental group was 46.93%.

Regarding students' performance in the individual parts of the test, differences can be found as well. The highest average score, 56.11%, was achieved in Part 5 of the reading paper. The lowest scores, on the other hand, were achieved in the second and the fourth part of the reading paper. These seem to be much more demanding than other parts of the test, since students scored only 30.56% in Part 2 and 40.00% in Part 4. Both of them included tasks requiring candidates to read the text for detailed comprehension, extract relevant details, be able to think critically and employ a large number of reading skills. Thus the experimental intervention should focus mainly on development and improvement in these areas.

2.3.2. Control Group Results

CONTROL GROUP							
Students	Part 1 Marks [-] 10	Part 2 Marks [-] 12	Part 3 Marks [-] 10	Part 4 Marks [-] 10	Part 5 Marks [-] 15	Score Marks [-] 57	Percent [%] 100.00
01	4	4	5	4	5	22	38.60
02	4	4	5	0	9	22	38.60
03	6	4	7	8	6	31	54.39
04	8	8	8	4	11	39	68.42
05	8	6	7	8	10	39	68.42
06	2	2	9	6	10	29	50.88
07	8	4	4	2	11	29	50.88
08	6	6	7	10	9	38	66.67
09	8	6	9	6	9	38	66.67
10	4	10	7	8	10	39	68.42
11	4	2	4	10	8	28	49.12
12	6	10	6	8	6	36	63.16
Total	68	66	78	74	104	390	
Average [%]	56.67	45.83	65.00	61.67	57.78	57.02	

Table 2: Pre-test – control group results

Similar to the treatment group, the results of individual students in the control group vary. The scores achieved in the pre-test ranged from 68.42% to 38.60%. This means that all students would have passed the Maturita exam in English even if the pass mark were 33%. The average score of the students in the control group was 57.02% which is almost 10% more than the average score of the students in the treatment group.

Regarding students' performance in the individual parts of the reading paper, some similarities with the treatment group can be found. Part 2 again proved to be difficult for the majority of students. The average score achieved here was 45.83%. The highest scores, on the other hand, were obtained in Part 3 of the reading paper with the average reaching 65.00%. Similar success was achieved in Part 4 where students' average score reached 61.67%. Generally, students in the control group performed better than students in the experimental group. This fact only emphasizes the need for reading skills development in the treatment group.

2.3.3. Reading Speed

In order to see the influence of regular intensive reading practice on reading speed, it was important to find out about students' performance before the experimental intervention took place. Students in the treatment group were asked to read an unfamiliar but simple text containing 250 words⁵. The text was accompanied by 10 comprehension questions. The procedure followed the steps described by Nuttall, where students read a text containing a definite number of words. The teacher's duty is to indicate the time in ten-second intervals on the board, using figures 1, 2, 3 etc. until the slowest reader has finished. Students then calculate their reading speed in words per minute by means of the simple equation $x / y \times 6 = z$, where "x is the number of words in the text, y is the number of ten-second intervals required to read the text, 6 is the number of ten-second intervals in a minute and z is the reading speed in words per minute" (36). As has been already mentioned, a satisfactory reading speed is 200 words per minute at 70% comprehension. The following table shows the students' results.

TREATMENT GROUP				
Students	Number of intervals [-]	Words per minute [w.p.m]	Marks [-]	Score [%]
	-	-	10	100
01	13	115	9	90
02	11	134	5	50
03	10	150	4	40
04	11	134	4	40
05	11	134	3	30
06	8	187.5	10	100
07	7	214	9	90
08	7	214	3	30
09	9	166	4	40
10	7	214	8	80
11	8	187.5	10	100
12	8	187.5	8	80
Total	-	2037.5	77	-
Average [-]	-	169.79	6.42	64.17

Table 3: Pre-test – treatment group reading speed

⁵ See appendix 1 for the text and comprehension questions.

As is clear from Table 3 above, reading speed and comprehension are very individual. Some students managed to read the text quickly and fully understand, but only two of them managed to reach the satisfactory level of 200 words per minute and 70% comprehension. Some students focused on speed and neglected comprehension which is certainly not acceptable. Yet others proved to be both slow and struggling readers who experience difficulties extracting the message from a piece of text. The average score of the group was about 170 words per minute at 64% comprehension.

Throughout the experimental intervention, not much attention was paid to direct instruction and practice activities that would lead to increasing students' reading speed. The main aim here was to learn about the potential secondary influence of general reading practice and skills development on increasing the reading speed. This is the reason why the reading speed test was not introduced in the control group.

2.4. Experimental Intervention

The following chapters of the practical part describe the activities done with the members of the experimental group in order to develop their reading skills and increase their reading comprehension. The main aim was to develop students' awareness of the form and structure of the new Maturita exam reading paper, familiarize them with its organization and requirements and introduce reading techniques that are important for successful and effective processing of the texts typical of the examination at the basic level.

Individual parts of the reading paper were dealt with separately as each part includes tasks that require a slightly different approach. At the same time, individual reading skills mentioned in the theoretical part were practiced in context, since context makes their importance more visible and their application much easier to understand, especially for weaker students. Moreover, when facing a real problem, students are usually much more motivated to find a solution than when presented with a potentially difficult abstract situation and asked to come up with ideas how to tackle it. Generally speaking, practice of all five parts of the Maturita reading paper followed the same pattern.

Each of the parts was first practiced on four texts corresponding with the tasks typical of the examination. The practice always started with a task slightly below the students' level so that they would not have to worry about language points and could focus on task requirements and adequate reading techniques. This was accompanied by a discussion dealing with effective reading skills and strategies that facilitate comprehension and lead to successful completion of the task. Students were also asked to trace the cause of problems they experience in order to learn how to overcome these difficulties later.

The following lessons were focused on the development of those skills. Each part of the Maturita reading paper was dealt with in approximately 3 or 4 lessons, depending on the difficulty of the tasks. At the end of the experimental intervention, each part of the examination was practiced on one more text to refresh and reinforce appropriate reading skills. Each of the parts was practiced on five texts altogether. The whole process lasted for ten weeks, from January to March, twenty lessons in total. Out of four lessons a week, two lessons focused on reading skills development. Students were not asked to work on their reading skills at home as most of them are not too willing to work individually outside the classroom or they simply forget they have been given homework. The same applies to students' attendance which is rather poor and frequently results in learning difficulties.

Regarding the control group, most lessons were based on the textbook *New Headway Pre-Intermediate*, dealing with the vocabulary, grammar and skills practice included there. The teacher occasionally introduced tasks from different sources in order to enrich her lessons and break the classroom routine or to provide further practice. However, she did not include extra activities that would directly lead to reading skills development.

Further on, the thesis describes, evaluates and comments on practice activities introduced throughout the experimental intervention in the treatment group. Each chapter deals with one of the five parts of the new Maturita exam and details the experimental procedures and their outcomes.

2.4.1. Part 1

Part 1 of the Maturita reading paper typically employs a number of short texts and asks candidates to answer the accompanying questions by choosing one of the options A, B, C or D where only one answer is correct, the remaining three being distractors. The texts are normally taken from the real world and include notices, short messages, labels and similar types of text.

Level: Intermediate

Aims: To extract the main message of a text, utilize non-text information, find out about the purpose and intended audience.

Materials: Photocopies of reading tasks corresponding to Part 1 of the Maturita reading paper taken from various sources⁶.

Stages and procedures:

1. Hand out copies of the text. Get students to decide about the type and purpose of each of the texts.
2. Elicit suitable reading skills and techniques supporting reading comprehension from the class in order to raise awareness of effective ways of reading the texts in question and completing the task successfully.
3. Practice reading of texts corresponding to Part 1 of the Maturita reading paper (short reading passages taken from various sources, such as Part 1 of past PET papers, the Internet or B1 level textbooks). Start with less demanding reading material gradually moving on to texts corresponding to the level of the examination. Ask students to read the texts individually and answer the accompanying questions. Allow them not more than eight minutes to do so when they have mastered the appropriate reading techniques.
4. Check the answers with the class. Encourage students to justify their answers and use this opportunity to discuss problematic points and clarify the meaning of unknown words.

⁶ An example can be seen in appendix 2.

Evaluation:

The introductory discussion seemed to be both interesting and beneficial for students as all of them were actively involved. They agreed that it is important to decide about the text type and message the text contains since this information might be vital for answering the questions successfully. Students also mentioned the importance of the context, namely the environment, especially in the case of labels and notices. Since the texts in Part 1 are frequently accompanied by, or make up a part of a picture, the students' attention was drawn to the importance of non-text information that can also contribute to and facilitate reading comprehension.

Concerning extracting the meaning from the text, the students themselves suggested underlining or highlighting keywords, which is beneficial especially for visual learners. They also suggested Czech translation as a means of getting the general idea of the meaning and finding the correct answer. However, they were warned against mere word spotting, since it might entice them to choose an incorrect option. Generally, it is suggested that they think about synonyms or other ways of rewording the original information.

Even though some of the texts might have been slightly above the level of the weaker students, their general performance improved throughout the experimental intervention and it could be seen as satisfactory when considering the 33% pass mark. However, most teachers would probably agree that such performance is somewhat insufficient and it is therefore important to provide further practice that would lead to comprehension improvement. Students should therefore learn to utilize appropriate reading skills to achieve the highest score possible.

In class, students were asked to work individually, read the texts for themselves and try to find the correct answers. They were encouraged to underline the keywords and make use of a wide range of reading skills in order to succeed. When they had finished, the correct and incorrect answers were discussed. Students were asked to give reasons for their decisions and explain why the distractors were incorrect. This proved to be a very helpful technique that allowed students to learn from their own mistakes and finally led to visible improvements. At the end of experimental intervention, most students were able to answer at least 60% of questions correctly.

2.4.2. Part 2

Part 2 of the Maturita reading paper consists of a longer text which is accompanied by a number of four-option multiple choice questions. The questions typically ask about the writer's opinions and attitude as well as factual information included in the text. Part 2 also challenges candidates' vocabulary.

Level: Intermediate

Aims: To encourage reading for detailed comprehension, practice making predictions and inferences and utilizing background knowledge, word-attack skills development.

Materials: Photocopies of reading tasks corresponding to Part 2 of the Maturita reading paper taken from various sources⁷.

Stages and procedures:

1. Hand out photocopies of the text and elicit and discuss suitable reading techniques. Get students to use the title to predict the content. Do the same with the questions following the text, but do not pay attention to the options yet. They might cause confusion at this stage.
2. Start with reading material slightly below the students' level to familiarize them with the task format and give them confidence and later introduce more challenging texts.
3. Try to discourage students from using dictionaries to make them used to exam situations. Promote guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context or morphological clues.
4. Practice reading on material corresponding to Part 2 of the examination. Ensure variety of texts. Later impose a time limit to speed up students' reading and bring the task closer to the exam situation.
5. Check answers with the class, asking for clarification of their decision. Encourage students to locate words, phrases or sentences that helped them answer the questions.

⁷ See appendix 3 for an example.

Evaluation:

Part 2 of the examination proved to be most difficult for all students taking the pre-test. It normally requires candidates to read for detailed comprehension and be able to deduce the meaning from the text. It also frequently asks about the general idea of the text, the author's purpose in writing it, point of view and other aspects. Successful tackling of such task requires not only full understanding but also the ability to think critically, link information from different parts of the text together and possess relevant background knowledge.

Concerning suitable reading techniques, students suggested underlining the key facts as they found it easier to link highlighted parts of the text to the questions. It also allowed them to disregard those parts of the text that included no relevant information. However, many of them experienced difficulties when asked to join information from different parts of the text together in order to work out some of the answers. Thus it frequently happened that inattentive students answered such questions incorrectly on the basis of information at the beginning of the text and ignoring facts coming later or vice versa.

Other problems were caused mainly by the way questions were formed. Students were aware of the fact they need to look for different words and expressions than those used in the questions. However, they frequently failed to find synonyms or paraphrases of the ideas, especially at the beginning of the experimental intervention. Later on, students gained more practice and became confident and skilled in both linking facts from different paragraphs together and interpreting the textual information.

The majority of the students managed to improve their performance in Part 2 of the Maturita reading paper, some of them reaching very high scores when compared to their pre-test results. However, weaker students and those who were often absent did not perform significantly better. Concerning the weaker students, they often struggled with a lack of vocabulary and an inability to use word-attack skills that were normally employed by better readers in the group. This led to a misunderstanding of the text and a low task achievement.

2.4.3. Part 3

This part of the examination tests reading of a longer factual text for specific information while ignoring irrelevant material. The candidates' task is to decide whether the statements preceding the text are true or false. Tasks employ adapted-authentic texts taken from sources such as brochures, leaflets or advertisements.

Level: Intermediate

Aims: To improve skimming for gist and scanning for detail, determine relevance of individual parts of the text, learn to utilise rhetorical organization of the text.

Materials: Photocopies of reading material corresponding to Part 3 of the Maturita reading paper taken from various sources⁸.

Stages and procedures:

1. Hand out copies of the text. Draw students' attention to the questions first. Ask them to predict the focus and content of the text. If possible, activate background knowledge they possess.
2. Get students to come up with ideas of how to paraphrase each of the statements or give synonyms of key words and expressions. Make sure they know that the texts normally employ different vocabulary than the statements.
3. Point out that the statements follow the order in which the information occurs in the text. Get students to make use of the titles of the individual parts of the passage and elicit information it may contain.
4. Encourage tackling the unfamiliar vocabulary by using word-attack skills to build up confidence.
5. Provide sufficient practice with both simple and more demanding texts in order to motivate students. Provide skimming and scanning practice to make them automatic and increase reading speed. Later on set a time limit of about 13 minutes to complete the task.

⁸ For an example see appendix 4.

Evaluation:

Regarding the pre-test results, most students from both groups did better in Part 3 of the new Maturita exam reading paper than in other parts of the test. However, the task demands that the reader skim and scan the text for specific information and rarely asks for deeper understanding of attitudes, opinions or relations between individual parts of the text and thus the results might have been even better.

The experimental intervention first focused on skimming and scanning development, making use of texts from various sources. A number of ready-made exercises can also be found on the Internet⁹. This kind of reading practice is particularly suitable for teenage learners as it employs information technology they are usually interested in. It also prevents faulty reading habits such as finger pointing. Finally, the Internet offers a number of graded texts and thus it is easy for the teacher to provide practice with both simple and more demanding reading material, allowing students to develop skimming and scanning gradually. The students themselves found this part of the experimental intervention very enjoyable and completed all tasks willingly and enthusiastically, especially at the beginning when they were asked to read texts slightly below their level which led to success and increased motivation.

When discussing the effect of increased skimming and scanning practice, the students themselves noticed they read texts more quickly than before, particularly after the time limit had been imposed. However, some of them focused on speed rather than accurate understanding, which brought problems with reading comprehension. These were typically caused by mere word spotting or confusion of positive and negative structures. Nevertheless, most students in the treatment group managed to improve their performance.

Regarding other reading skills, students had opportunities to practice predicting the content of the text, guessing meaning from the context and other clues, text-attack skills connected with rhetorical organization and utilizing non-text information. They also improved in distinguishing relevant and irrelevant parts of a text and extracting important information.

⁹ For A2 level reading exercises see <<http://www.esl-lounge.com/student/reading-pre-intermediate.php>>
For B1 level reading exercises see <<http://www.esl-lounge.com/student/reading-intermediate.php>>

2.4.4. Part 4

Part 4 of the examination presents candidates with five short descriptions of people and a number of short texts. Their task is to match each person to a text, making sure all requirements given in the description are met. The task asks candidates to read all texts carefully for detailed comprehension.

Level: Intermediate

Aims: To encourage skimming and scanning and matching information with specific criteria.

Materials: Photocopies of reading material corresponding to Part 4 of the Maturita reading paper taken from various sources¹⁰.

Stages and procedures:

1. Hand out copies of the reading material. Start with simple texts to motivate students and demonstrate reading strategies they need for tackling the task successfully. Later employ texts matching B1 level and ask students to complete the task in 13 minutes.
2. Point out that no text can be an answer for two questions.
3. Warn students that the number of descriptions and the number of short texts may not be the same. The task can include some extra texts that do not suit any of the descriptions. Discourage word spotting as it might lead to mistakes.
4. Ask students to read the descriptions underlining key facts. When they have finished, ask them to read the short texts looking for the information that would match the descriptions. Encourage students to read the texts very carefully. They might include some details which make them wrong.
5. Check the answers with the class. Ask students to justify their answers. Discuss why the extra texts do not match the descriptions.

¹⁰ See appendix 5.

Evaluation:

Part 4 of the Maturita reading paper stresses the need for careful in-depth reading and it asks candidates to fully comprehend the message and distinguish between a number of texts containing very similar information. Detailed understanding is the most important factor determining success or failure in this part of the paper. It was therefore important to focus on the skills that would help candidates make appropriate choices when matching descriptions and texts.

Practice of this type of exercise started with group work. Students were given both descriptions and short texts slightly below their level. These were, moreover, cut up, so that they could shuffle them as they read. This helped them share ideas and complete the task quickly. When asked to come up with suggestions for carrying out the task effectively, students were able to recall the steps they took when doing the exercise, helping them to realize what strategies are appropriate. They generally appreciated the possibility of changing the position of the cards easily which is obviously not possible when taking the Maturita exam. Instead, students suggested highlighting or even numbering the key facts of each description and then checking which of the text matched all the requirements.

Many students also mentioned the importance of vocabulary knowledge, especially in recognizing synonyms and paraphrases. With regard to the short texts that are typically used in Part 4 of the paper, it might be somewhat difficult to guess the meaning from the context since the length of the reading material is limited to very short paragraphs. Knowledge of grammatical structures and text types also proved to be beneficial, as this task normally employs texts that demonstrate distinctive qualities. For example, advertisements typically make use of abbreviations and elliptical structures.

However, most students did well and managed to complete the task successfully and achieve relatively high scores. The weaker students kept struggling with this type of exercise, frequently preferring distractors to the texts that actually matched the descriptions. This was caused mainly by a lack of vocabulary knowledge, an inability to employ adequate reading skills and carelessness. Absentees experienced difficulties as well.

2.4.5. Part 5

The last part of the Maturita reading paper tests candidates' knowledge of lexis and grammar. It is a three-option multiple choice cloze. Questions typically follow the text to encourage candidates to read in the required way. The task employs adapted-authentic texts.

Level: Intermediate

Aims: To practice making use of context – vocabulary and grammatical structures, guessing.

Materials: Copies of texts corresponding to Part 5 of the Maturita reading paper taken from various sources¹¹.

Stages and procedures:

1. Hand out the copies. As with the preceding parts of the reading paper, start with texts slightly below the students' level and later continue with more difficult texts, imposing a time limit. This would make the task more authentic as it would resemble a language testing situation.
2. Firstly get students to read through the text without looking at the questions to get a general idea of what it is about.
3. Tell students to look around the gap in the text and infer what type of word would fit, considering both form and meaning. The task may test vocabulary, grammar or both of them at the same time.
4. Ask students to go through the questions and choose one of the options. If they are not sure which answer is correct, it is always better to make a guess than leave the space empty.
5. Check the answers. Ask students to clarify why the incorrect options cannot be used. Use this opportunity to discuss any language points the students find problematic.

¹¹ See appendix 6 for an example.

Evaluation:

Part 5 of the examination focuses on candidates' knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and lexico-structural patterns of the English language. Obviously, candidates are expected to use a wide range of reading skills in order to fulfil the task. At the same time, their command of the target language needs to correspond with the level of the examination. If it does not, candidates have to face difficulties reaching beyond the ability to read and comprehend a text.

Discussing the practical approach to this type of exercise, students agreed that the process of elimination is the most suitable tactic for success. As this part of the exam takes the form of a three-option multiple choice cloze, there is a relatively high chance to choose the correct option without knowing the answer. Candidates should therefore always make a guess when they do not know, or are not entirely sure of the correct answer. Moreover, incorrect answers will not be penalized, meaning that candidates do not face the risk of losing marks and thus they can only gain when making a guess.

Regarding appropriate reading techniques, various ones can be used. Students frequently made use of structural patterns, looking at what precedes and follows the gap and inferring what part of speech would be most suitable. They also used the context to deduce the meaning of the missing words. However, a significant improvement in their performance was not visible since successfully completing the task does not depend only on reading itself, but also requires candidates to possess a wider knowledge of the language.

2.4.6. Evaluation

To sum up, the whole experimental intervention focused on reading skills development, making use of texts and tasks that are typical of the new Maturita exam reading paper. The tasks were taken from various sources to ensure variety. Students started practicing on easier texts to become familiar with the form, organization and requirements of individual parts without worrying much about language points. Later on, tasks corresponding to the B1 level were introduced and a time limit set in order to get students used to the testing situation. Towards the end of the experimental intervention students became more comfortable when working alone and gained more independence and autonomy.

2.5. Post-test

As it was necessary to learn about the effect of extensive reading practice students were subjected to throughout the experimental intervention, a post-test was administered at the end of the experiment. The post-test was taken from the *Catalogue of Requirements* since it is published by CERMAT and thus should correspond with the reading paper of the new Maturita exam that students are supposed to sit next year. Its form and content should also be comparable to the reading paper that was used in the pre-test and thus it should clearly illustrate potential differences in the students' performance before and after the experimental intervention.

As with the pre-test, the post-test consisted of five parts that included reading tasks typical of the examination. Students were again divided into two groups and seated individually in two classrooms. They were supposed to complete the reading test in 60 minutes and indicate their answers on an answer sheet. Both general instructions concerning the organization of the test and individual task instructions were given in Czech.

Marking of the post-test adhered to the information stated by *The Catalogue of Requirements* and the way the pre-test was scored. The post-test consisted of a total of 35 questions worth either one or two marks. Tasks requiring close and careful reading included questions that carried two marks (Parts 1, 2 and 4). The remaining test questions were awarded one mark (Parts 3 and 5). Students could score a maximum of 47 points. Since the scores students could achieve in the pre-test and post-test differ, the results have been converted into percentages to allow comparison.

Even though both the tests used in this experiment are published by CERMAT, they differ in the number of questions included in the individual parts and the highest score candidates can achieve. However, since these two tests are the only new Maturita reading papers available, there was no other way how to conduct the experiment in accordance with *The Catalogue of Requirements* and CERMAT. All points in which the reading papers vary are dealt with in more detail in later chapters focusing on pre-test/post-test comparison.

The following chapters of this thesis provide a detailed description of the post-test results accompanied by comments on the students' performance in individual parts of the paper. They also compare the students' achievement in both pre-test and post-test, discussing the influence of the experimental intervention on the treatment group in terms of general performance, comprehension and reading speed.

2.5.1. Treatment Group Results

TREATMENT GROUP							
Students	Part 1 Marks [-]	Part 2 Marks [-]	Part 3 Marks [-]	Part 4 Marks [-]	Part 5 Marks [-]	Score Marks [-]	Percent [%]
	4	10	8	10	15	47	100.00
01	4	8	5	8	8	33	70.21
02	4	10	6	2	6	28	59.57
03	4	2	2	0	5	13	27.66
04	2	2	4	4	7	19	40.43
05	2	2	4	2	5	15	31.91
06	4	8	6	4	11	33	70.21
07	4	8	7	6	10	35	74.47
08	0	8	4	2	9	23	48.94
09	4	6	1	8	8	27	57.45
10	4	10	7	10	13	44	93.62
11	4	8	6	6	12	36	76.60
12	4	10	7	6	12	39	82.98
Total	40	82	59	58	106	345	
Average [%]	83.33	68.33	61.46	48.33	58.89	61.17	

Table 4: Post-test – treatment group results

Table 4 summarizes the post-test results of the students in the experimental group. It shows both their overall scores and achievement in individual parts of the paper. The highest score achieved in the pre-test was 93.62 %, whereas the lowest score was 27.66%. Considering the cut-off scores proposed by CERMAT, all students would have been able to pass this part of the examination if the pass mark were 22%. However, two students would have failed if the pass mark were 33%. The average score of the students in the experimental group was 61.17%.

Concerning achievement in the individual parts of the paper, most students performed very well in Part 1, where the average reached 83.33%. However, Part 1 consisted of two questions only and thus it was possible to gain only 100%, 50% or 0% of marks. In other words, the number of questions was so low that it is impossible to obtain a reliable picture of the students' performance. The lowest scores, on the other hand, were achieved in Part 4 of the paper with an average performance 48.33%.

2.5.2. Control Group Results

CONTROL GROUP							
Students	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4	Part 5	Score	Percent
	Marks [-]	Marks [-]	Marks [-]	Marks [-]	Marks [-]	Marks [-]	[%]
	4	10	8	10	15	47	100.00
01	4	6	4	2	4	20	42.55
02	4	0	5	4	7	20	42.55
03	2	6	3	4	9	24	51.06
04	4	6	7	6	7	30	63.83
05	4	6	7	4	9	30	63.83
06	2	4	6	8	7	27	57.45
07	2	6	5	2	9	24	51.06
08	4	2	6	6	8	26	55.32
09	4	8	7	6	11	36	76.60
10	4	4	5	4	7	24	51.06
11	4	4	5	2	8	23	48.94
12	4	8	5	6	9	32	68.09
Total	42	60	65	54	95	316	
Average [%]	87.50	50.00	67.71	45.00	52.78	56.03	

Table 5: Post-test – control group results

The control group results are shown in Table 5 above. As with the treatment group, there are individual differences in students' performance. Nevertheless, scores ranging from 42.55% to 76.60% ensure that all students would have been able to pass the new Maturita reading paper. The average score achieved in the control group was 56.03%, which is about 5% less than the average achievement of students in the treatment group.

Not surprisingly, the best results were achieved in the first part of the paper. The students' average score was 87.50%. This only underlines the fact that Part 1 of the pre-test does not provide reliable results. Concerning other parts of the reading paper, students performed well in Part 3 too, achieving 67.71%. However, scores gained in the remaining parts of the test ranged from 45.00% to 52.78% only. On the whole, the students in the control group performed slightly worse than the students in the treatment group. Nonetheless, all of the control group students would have been able to pass the paper successfully.

2.5.3. Reading Speed

TREATMENT GROUP				
Students	Number of intervals	Words per minute	Marks	Score
	[-]	[w.p.m]	[-]	[%]
	-	-	10	100
1	9	166	10	100
2	11	134	6	60
3	10	150	8	80
4	11	134	5	50
5	11	134	4	40
6	8	187.5	9	90
7	6	250	9	90
8	9	166	8	80
9	9	166	6	60
10	7	214	10	100
11	9	166	10	100
12	6	250	10	100
Total	-	2117.5		-
Average [-]	-	176.46	7.92	79.17

Table 6: Post-test – treatment group reading speed

After the pos-test, one more reading test was administered in the treatment group. The main objective was to discover a possible effect of the experimental intervention on students' reading speed. The procedure followed the steps described in chapter 2.3.3. Reading Speed. Students were once again given an unfamiliar but easy text¹² containing 250 words and asked to read it silently for themselves, paying careful attention to the message. The text was accompanied by 10 true/false comprehension

¹² See appendix 7.

questions that students had to answer. Table 6 shows the students' results. Eight out of twelve students were able to achieve at least 70% comprehension. However, only three of them read more than 200 words per minute. The rest of the class either read the text too slowly or did not manage to answer the required number of comprehension questions correctly. Pre-test/post-test comparison of the students' reading speed is dealt with later in this thesis.

2.6. Pre-test/Post-test Comparison

In order to demonstrate the effect of the experimental intervention, the following pages of this thesis provide a comparison of the scores achieved in the pre-test and post-test in both the experimental and control group. Except for Part 1, all parts of the sample papers should allow relatively reliable comparison of results as they include roughly the same number of questions, employ the same task types and follow the same format. Both tests were also administered under the same conditions. However, as students could gain 57 marks in the pre-test but only 47 marks in the post-test, the number of marks is not relevant here. The comparison is therefore based on the scores converted into percentage.

The tables below summarize the individual student's achievement in the pre-test and post-test. They also provide a comparison of scores the students obtained in the separate parts of both reading papers. A short commentary follows each of the tables, discussing and evaluating the results, explaining their possible discrepancies and potential distortions that might have been caused by differences in the structure of the tests. Finally, conclusions are drawn on the basis of the information contained in the tables.

2.6.1. Treatment Group

TREATMENT GROUP					
Students	PRE-TEST		POST-TEST		Difference
	Score	Percent	Score	Percent	Percent
	57		47		
	[-]	[%]	[-]	[%]	[%]
01	29	50.88	33	70.21	19.33
02	17	29.82	28	59.57	29.75
03	19	33.33	13	27.66	-5.67
04	22	38.60	19	40.43	1.83
05	31	54.39	15	31.91	-22.48
06	26	45.61	33	70.21	24.60
07	32	56.14	35	74.47	18.33
08	27	47.37	23	48.94	1.57
09	28	49.12	27	57.45	8.33
10	29	50.88	44	93.62	42.74
11	38	66.67	36	76.60	9.93
12	23	40.35	39	82.98	42.63
Total	321	-	345	-	-
Average [%]	-	46.93	-	61.17	14.24

Table 7: Pre-test/Post-test comparison – treatment group students’ results

As is clear from Table 7 above, there are considerable differences between students’ performance in the pre-test and post-test. Most students that were subjected to the experimental intervention achieved higher scores in the post-test. The average score in the pre-test was 46.93% whereas the average score in the post-test was 61.17%. The average increase in students’ achievement was 14.24%, but two of the students managed to improve their performance by more than 40%.

On the other hand, some students showed almost no signs of progress. These are those whose attendance is generally poor and thus they did not have a chance to practice and develop their reading skills as they actually did not take part in the experimental intervention. Two girls performed even worse than when taking the pre-test. These girls are generally considered to be low achievers. Moreover, neither of them attended the classes regularly, thus denying themselves the opportunity to improve their reading skills. Interestingly enough, one of them scored 54.39% in the pre-test which was rather surprising as she normally struggles to meet the requirements of her English classes.

A possible explanation for this unexpectedly good performance might be the nature of the new Maturita reading test itself. As students choose their answers from two, three or four options, there is a chance of guessing the correct answer successfully and complete the reading task without proper understanding. However, the girl's achievement in the post-test of 31.39% was much closer to her usual performance.

TREATMENT GROUP			
	PRE-TEST	POST-TEST	
Part	Average [%]	Average [%]	Difference [%]
Part 1	53.33	83.33	30.00
Part 2	30.56	68.33	37.77
Part 3	53.33	61.46	8.13
Part 4	40.00	48.33	8.33
Part 5	56.11	58.89	2.78

Table 8: Pre-test/post-test comparison – treatment group results of individual parts

With regard to the students' performance in the individual parts of the pre-test and post-test, some striking differences can be found. Part 1 results do not allow a valid comparison of results as it included five questions in one of the tests, but only two questions in the other. As is clear from Table 8, the difference reached 30.00%, but the results are of little value since the number of questions differed significantly.

Part 2 also demonstrates a remarkable improvement in post-test scores. Students' achievement rose from 30.56% to 68.33%. However, Part 2 of the pre-test contained 6 questions while Part 2 of the post-test included only 5 questions which might also have distorted the results. Despite possible inaccuracy, it seems that the experimental intervention had a substantial impact on the students' performance since their scores in this part of the reading test doubled.

Scores achieved in both Part 3 and Part 4 of the post-test increased by 8%. Nevertheless, in Part 3 the number of questions differed as well. There were 10 questions in the pre-test, but only 8 questions in the post-test. Part 4 contained 10 questions in both tests. Even though the increase in the students' scores is not as large as

in Part 2, the experimental intervention still appears to affect the students' performance in a positive way.

The students' achievements in the last part of the reading paper also demonstrate some improvements. The average score increased by 2.78%. This is, however, not convincing enough to claim the experimental intervention had a major effect on the students' performance. An apparent correspondence of Part 5 results in both tests might also be explained by the nature of the task itself. As the main focus is not only on reading, but also on testing vocabulary, grammar and lexico-structural language points, the experimental intervention would have to be focused on these rather than on reading skills development in order to achieve better results.

2.6.2. Control Group

CONTROL GROUP					
Students	PRE-TEST		POST-TEST		Difference
	Score	Percent	Score	Percent	Percent
	57		47		
	[-]	[%]	[-]	[%]	[%]
01	22	38.60	20	42.55	3.95
02	22	38.60	20	42.55	3.95
03	31	54.39	24	51.06	-3.33
04	39	68.42	30	63.83	-4.59
05	39	68.42	30	63.83	-4.59
06	29	50.88	27	57.45	6.57
07	29	50.88	24	51.06	0.18
08	38	66.67	26	55.32	-11.35
09	38	66.67	36	76.60	9.93
10	39	68.42	24	51.06	-17.36
11	28	49.12	23	48.94	-0.18
12	36	63.16	32	68.09	4.93
Total	390	-	316	-	-
Average [%]	-	57.02	-	56.03	-0.99

Table 9: Pre-test/Post-test comparison – control group students' results

The control group students' performance in both tests does not demonstrate major changes when compared to the results of the treatment group. A half of the students managed to improve whereas the other half performed worse in the post-test. However, the average achievement in the post-test is 56.03% which is only 0.99%

less than the average performance in the pre-test. The best post-test score achieved was 9.93% higher than the pre-test score while the worst post-test score was 17.36% lower than the pre-test score. Nevertheless, most of the students in the control group performed equally in both Maturita reading papers and differences in their results were not as visible as those achieved by the students in the experimental group.

CONTROL GROUP			
	PRE-TEST	POST-TEST	
Parts	Average [%]	Average [%]	Difference [%]
Part 1	56.67	87.50	30.83
Part 2	45.83	50.00	4.17
Part 3	65.00	67.71	2.71
Part 4	61.67	45.00	-16.67
Part 5	57.78	52.78	-5.00

Table 10: Pre-test/post-test comparison – control group results of individual parts

Considering each part of the reading paper separately, the control group students' performance in both tests is very similar. Except for Part 1, whose results proved to be unreliable and invalid because of the unequal number of questions included, in most cases the students' performance in the post-test matches their achievement in the pre-test.

Both the second and the third part of the post-test demonstrate slight improvements in the students' performance. Part 2 scores increased by 4.17% and Part 3 scores by 2.71%. The remaining two parts, on the other hand, seem to have been more difficult as the students generally achieved lower scores than they did in the pre-test. Part 5 scores decreased by 5.00%. Part 4 seemed to be the most demanding part of the post-test as the students' scores dropped by 16.67%.

To sum up, the control group results proved that the experimental intervention influenced the treatment group students' performance in a positive way. The improvement was particularly visible in Part 2 of the post-test. Performance in the remaining parts of the paper showed the students' progress as well, even though it was not as impressive.

2.6.3. Reading Speed

TREATMENT GROUP						
	PRE-TEST		POST-TEST		DIFFERENCE	
Students	Words per minute [w.p.m.]	Score [%]	Words per minute [w.p.m.]	Score [%]	Words per minute [w.p.m.]	Score [%]
01	115	90	166	100	51	10
02	134	50	134	60	0	10
03	150	40	150	80	0	40
04	134	40	134	50	0	10
05	134	30	134	40	0	10
06	187.5	100	187.5	90	0	-10
07	214	90	250	90	36	0
08	214	30	166	80	-48	50
09	166	40	166	60	0	20
10	214	80	214	100	0	20
11	187.5	100	166	100	-22	0
12	187.5	80	250	100	63	20
Average [w.p.m]	169.79	-	176.46	-	6.67	-
Average [%]	-	64.17	-	79.17	-	15.00

Table 11: Pre-test/post-test comparison – treatment group reading speed

As regards changes in reading speed, the performance of most students does not show any great differences. Only three students managed to reach the satisfactory level of 200 words per minute and 70% comprehension. The rest of the students either did not read fast enough or did not answer the required number of comprehension questions correctly. However, the results in the table support what has already been said. The experimental intervention seems to have influenced the students' reading comprehension and developed their reading skills. Even though most of them cannot read 200 w.p.m. and their reading speed has not changed much, reading comprehension increased on average by 15% and 9 out of 12 students improved their performance. Both extended reading practice and reading skills development thus proved to be valuable as they expand the students' ability to work with a piece of writing, extract the meaning from the printed page and use the information obtained appropriately and effectively.

Conclusion

The main objective of the experiment described in this thesis was to find out what reading skills are essential for passing the new Maturita in English, or more precisely its reading paper. It also focused on reading tasks and activities themselves to determine how they should be designed in order to increase reading comprehension, raise reading speed and enhance the language learner's confidence when taking the reading test in English. The following paragraphs summarize the conclusions that can be drawn based upon the results of the action research conducted on a group of 3rd year students of the Secondary School of Business and Services, Vsetín. However, it is important to bear in mind that the research sample consisted of 24 students only and thus was too small to allow a wider generalization of the results of the experiment.

Firstly, the results of the experiment indicate that it is vital to provide students with a considerable amount of practice and to take advantage of every opportunity to promote extensive reading outside the classroom. Concerning classroom activities, it proved to be beneficial to use the same type of tasks that would normally appear in the Maturita reading paper. Students become used to the structure and organization of the tasks and also familiarized with their requirements. Thus they do not have to worry about the formal aspects of the tasks and can focus solely on their completion. Moreover, students learn how to approach particular types of reading tasks and acquire appropriate reading behaviour patterns that will lead to increasing their autonomy and allow them to become more efficient readers.

Secondly, when dealing with texts, it is beneficial to make students aware of what they actually do prior to, during and after reading them. This strategic awareness actually helps them to become more confident and independent readers when taking the examination. Through reading practice, students learn what reading strategies are most suitable for completing the particular tasks within the individual parts of the Maturita reading paper. They also acquire and/or develop appropriate reading skills. These skills can also be transferred from an educational environment to the real world and later be used outside the classroom when tackling authentic texts in the target language.

Thirdly, when experiencing problems, students become more motivated to acquire reading skills that might help to overcome difficulties. Since there are a large number of reading skills and every reader uses them in a slightly different manner, it is difficult to choose those that are more helpful than others. However, a list of such skills would certainly contain items from each group of reading skills mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis as they complement each other and cannot be separate easily. Thus it is important to teach students to increase and vary reading speed as sometimes we read for gist and at other times for specific information. Compensatory skills are also essential. Students need to learn how to infer meaning from a text, utilizing structural clues and context, because in real-life situations we seldom have a reference book or dictionary to hand. They should also be acquainted with word-attack and text-attack skills and make use of non-text information as it frequently facilitates reading comprehension.

Finally, it is also advantageous to put reading tasks into a context resembling a language testing situation and make practice more authentic. Timing is therefore a very useful tool as well as individual work. However, this should be done only when students have practiced reading enough so that they do not experience failure which might lead to demotivation. If introduced at the right time, students can only benefit, since they become used to the time limit and gain a reasonable level of confidence.

Regarding reading speed, mere reading practice based on Maturita reading paper tasks did not prove to be effective. In spite of the fact that three students improved, increasing reading speed apparently requires other types of exercise and different teaching methods. The same applies to Part 5 of the paper. The students' performance remained more or less the same, suggesting that the task requires candidates to be good readers as well as to possess knowledge of grammar and vocabulary corresponding with the B1 level.

In summary, the experimental intervention based on utilizing texts resembling the new Maturita reading tasks proved to be successful as it led to reading skills development and an increase in the students' comprehension and confidence. Classroom practice sometimes even led to competitive behaviour which further motivated the students to do their best when practicing exam reading. However, in order to achieve the desired effect, it is essential that students attend classes regularly and work on their own, trying to understand and reach better results through critically thinking about appropriate reading techniques, wide reading practice and willingness to learn

from their own mistakes. Far too often, students rely on their teachers rather than on themselves, being passive onlookers of the teaching/learning process. It is therefore vital to increase the learners' autonomy and make the students realize that they are responsible for their own learning and progress.

As regards the examination itself, further clarification should be provided. Since the new Maturita exam is a project that was first introduced in the mid 1990s and finally enacted in 2004, one would expect it to be much better prepared. Unfortunately, access to teaching materials and information about the examination itself is still rather limited. It is therefore not surprising that there are a large number of objectors to the state Maturita exam among secondary school teachers, students and the general public even though a common state exam could bring many advantages. Most of all, it would allow comparison of learning outcomes providing it was based on standardized, objective, reliable and valid tests. Because CERMAT has provided literally no methodical support for English language teaching and Maturita practice, it is important that every secondary school teacher explore the form, organization and requirements of the exam themselves and apply the information gathered into their own teaching. The process, however, is rather demanding and time-consuming and requires teachers to approach their practice actively. Being innovative, flexible and willing to search for suitable teaching material is essential, especially in the launching phase of the project.

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Résumé

This master's thesis deals with reading skills development for the new Maturita exam. It is focused on promoting reading practice on tasks corresponding with the Maturita reading paper in order to prepare secondary school students to pass the examination successfully.

The theoretical part details various aspects of reading as a skill. It also describes individual reading skills students should master in order to become successful, efficient and independent readers. The last chapters of the theoretical part provide detailed information about the new Maturita exam in English with particular focus on its reading paper.

The practical part of this thesis describes action research conducted at the Secondary School of Business and Services in Vsetín. It includes a description of the experimental procedure to which students were subjected, evaluating the activities used and discussing learning outcomes.

Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá rozvojem čtenářských dovedností nezbytných pro složení nové maturitní zkoušky. Zaměřuje se na využití úloh typických pro subtest čtení a jazykové kompetence, jakožto prostředku k přípravě středoškolských studentů k úspěšnému složení nové maturitní zkoušky.

Teoretická část poskytuje detailní pohled na různé aspekty čtení. Popisuje také jednotlivé čtenářské dovednosti, které studenti musejí ovládat, aby se stali úspěšnými, zdatnými a samostatnými čtenáři. Poslední kapitoly teoretické části poskytují detailní informace o nové maturitní zkoušce, zejména pak subtestu čtení a jazykové kompetence.

Praktická část této diplomové práce popisuje akční výzkum provedený na Střední škole obchodu a služeb Vsetín. Zahrnuje popis experimentálních postupů, kterým byli studenti podrobeni, hodnotí použité aktivity a diskutuje výsledky výuky.

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Appendix 1: Reading speed – pre-test text

Jamie Oliver

Jamie Oliver is one of Britain's favourite chefs – every week millions of people watch him on TV and use his recipes.

Jamie was born in Essex, England, in 1975. When he was only eight, he started helping in his parents' restaurant. He went to catering college when he was sixteen and then worked at the famous River Café in London for three years. His first TV programme was called *The Naked Chef* and it was an instant success. Jamie quickly became famous and in 1999 he prepared lunch for the British Prime Minister.

Now Jamie has got his own restaurant in London called Fifteen. But it isn't a typical restaurant – every year Jamie takes fifteen young unemployed people and teaches them to become chefs. The programme about the restaurant, also called Fifteen, is on TV every week. He is going to open Fifteen restaurants in Australia and the USA in the future and at the moment Jamie is writing a new book of recipes. He's already very rich, of course – in 2003 he earned £3.8 million!

Jamie got married in 2000 and he lives in London with his wife, Jools, and their two daughters, Poppy Honey and Daisy Boo. He's so busy that he doesn't have much free time, but he loves riding around London on his scooter and he plays the drums in a rock band. When he's at home he likes cooking pasta and making bread – his favourite ingredients are olive oil and lemons from Sicily.

Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F)

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1. Jamie Oliver is a famous cook. | T / F |
| 2. He comes from Britain. | T / F |
| 3. He cooked a meal for the British Prime Minister in the past. | T / F |
| 4. People didn't like Jamie's first TV programme called <i>The Naked Chef</i> . | T / F |
| 5. He is going to open fifteen Fifteen restaurants in Australia and the USA. | T / F |
| 6. He earned almost £4 million in 2003. | T / F |
| 7. He has been married for 10 years. | T / F |
| 8. Jamie has two children, a boy and a girl. | T / F |
| 9. Jamie has little free time. | T / F |
| 10. He cannot play a musical instrument. | T / F |

Redston, Chris and Gillie Cunningham. *Face 2 Face Pre-Intermediate Student's book*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.

Appendix 2: Part 1 sample text

Test 2

PAPER 1 Reading and Writing Test 1 hour 30 minutes

READING

PART 1

- Questions 1-5
- Look at the sign in each question.
 - Someone asks you what it means.
 - Mark the letter next to the correct explanation – A, B, C or D – on your answer sheet.

Example:



- 0
- A Do not leave your bike touching the window.
 - B Do not ride your bicycle in this area.
 - C Broken glass may damage your bicycle tyres.
 - D Your bike may not be safe here.

Example answer:

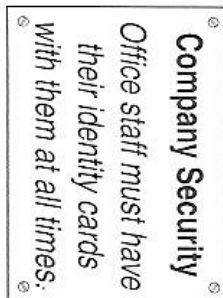
	Part 1
0	<input type="radio"/> A <input type="radio"/> B <input type="radio"/> C <input type="radio"/> D



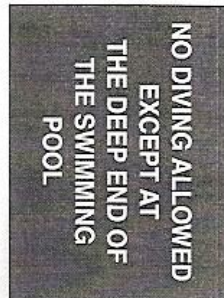
- 1
- A The gardens are not open on weekdays in the winter.
 - B The gardens are open one day a week in the winter.
 - C You cannot visit the gardens at weekends in winter.
 - D You can visit the gardens on any winter day.

26

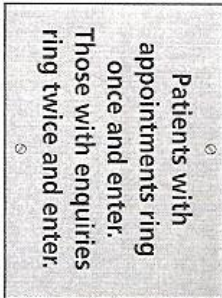
Reading



- 2
- A The company insists office workers carry an identity card.
 - B Show your identity card when asked to do so.
 - C Staff should keep their identity cards in a safe place.
 - D Staff identity cards are available at the office.



- 3
- A If you are not good at diving, keep to the shallow end.
 - B You must not dive into the pool where the water is shallow.
 - C The water is not deep enough in this pool for you to dive.
 - D You are not permitted to swim where people are diving.



- 4
- A To make an appointment, ring once and enter.
 - B You should ring twice and enter unless you have an enquiry.
 - C Ring once if you have an appointment and twice if you don't.
 - D If you have an enquiry to make, enter and then ring the bell twice.



- 5
- A You must stay with your luggage at all times.
 - B You must check in your luggage immediately.
 - C Do not let someone else look after your luggage.
 - D Do not forget your luggage when you leave.

27

Appendix 3: Part 2 sample text

8


Part 4

Questions 21-25

Read the text and questions below.
For each question, mark the correct letter A, B, C or D on your answer sheet.

Doug Allan, Wildlife Cameraman

I recently spent two years in the Arctic filming the series *Blue Planet*. I love being in an environment that hasn't changed for 20,000 years. Of course it's freezing, but it must be a healthy place because you never catch colds.



When I'm filming, I like to really feel how lonely the environment is. Filming underwater involves cutting through thick ice and diving in head to a line. The person at the other end has to be ready to pull you out fast if necessary.

Originally I was a research diver for the *British Antarctic Survey* project, but for me science lacked excitement. I'd always enjoyed photography, and whenever camera teams passed through, they encouraged me to watch and learn. I was then able to move into filming in 1985 and have concentrated on Arctic and Antarctic wildlife ever since.

I prefer to be face to face with the animals I'm filming. I haven't got in the water with killer whales yet, but I plan to. Of course, it's dangerous if you choose the wrong moment. They're big animals and can move fast, so I'd be stupid to film them searching for food!

I've never had problems with polar bears, although once I was frightened when one tried to get into my tent. Polar bears are bold, clever and dangerous. But I made this one see I wasn't about to attack it – I'm sure it realised I wouldn't hurt it.

When I come back home from my trips, I work in the mornings and spend the afternoons swimming to keep fit. Now I'm fifty, filming is harder. The challenge for me is to continue to deliver high-quality work.

21 In this text, Doug Allan is describing

- the challenges of the environment he works in.
- the career opportunities in TV camera work.
- the difficulties of having to work alone.
- the beautiful scenery of the Arctic.

9

22 What does Doug say about his early career?

- He wasted the years he spent as a scientist.
- It was a good chance to learn about filming.
- He was bored by working only in the Antarctic.
- It taught him how to become a skilled diver.

23 When talking about killer whales, Doug says that

- he will only film them from a safe distance.
- he has always been careful when diving with them.
- he tries to avoid any danger by facing them.
- he believes there are safe opportunities to film them.

24 How does Doug describe his experience with a polar bear?

- The animal was much more afraid than Doug was.
- Doug felt nervous that the bear might come back.
- The bear seemed to know Doug wasn't a danger.
- Doug realised he was wrong to trust polar bears.

25 What might Doug say about his job as a cameraman?

A

Now I've reached fifty, I realise the dangers involved in getting the best pictures are too great.

B

I'm glad I gave up working as a scientist because I'm now in a position to be able to retire early.

C

Although I find the work more difficult now I'm not as young, I still have other film projects I'm keen to do.

D

I've made wildlife films in every country in the world, but I want to keep filming until I get too old.

[Turn Over]

8

2

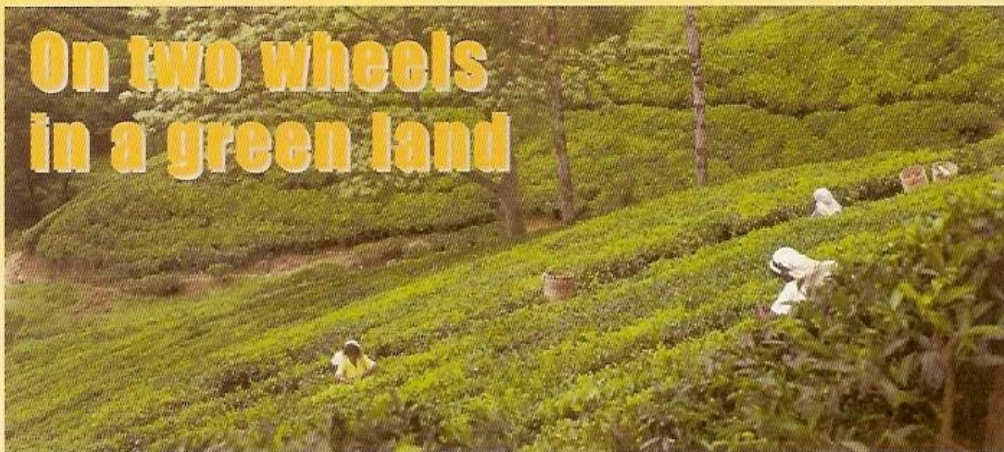
The wide world

1 Reading

1 Would you like to tour a foreign country on a bicycle? Which countries do you think it would be good to visit in this way? Would tourists enjoy travelling through your country by bike?

2 Read the sentences about cycling in Sri Lanka. Then read the text and decide if each sentence is correct or incorrect.

- 1 More people in Sri Lanka ride a mountain bike than any other kind of bike.
- 2 The writer says that you can go a satisfactory distance each day on a bike.
- 3 The writer says a bicycle is a restful way of travelling through Sri Lanka.
- 4 The canals provide water for rice growing in spaces in the jungle.
- 5 The writer admired the colours of the countryside.



It is often said that the best way to see a country is to use the method of transport which is traditional in that particular place. So people should see Argentina on horseback, Nepal on foot and the US by car. If this is true, then a bicycle is the perfect way to visit Sri Lanka. Although the 18-speed mountain bike I used is not an everyday sight, more traditional models are popular all over the country.

Sharing the same kind of transport as local people changes the way you see the place. You are travelling at a speed that somehow fits the scenery – not so slow that you only see a small area each day, and not so fast that the details of the countryside are missed. Better still, you can stop whenever you want to listen to the birds or a waterfall, talk to people, smell their cooking or take a photo. However, this doesn't mean cycling in Sri Lanka is relaxing. If you want to see the whole country, you have to leave the towns and villages and cycle through jungle,

where the temperature is 37 degrees, cross streams, climb hills and go over paths which are made of mud, rock or sand.

The most pleasant paths in the jungle follow the irrigation canals. These carry water into the bright green rice fields which appear at regular intervals among the trees. During the afternoon, groups of children, farm workers and water buffalo all come to swim in the canals. Then, when you climb from the jungle up into the hilly area in the centre of the country, you see every hillside is covered with neat rows of tea bushes in another brilliant shade of green. In fact, the whole country is covered in more different and beautiful shades of green than I ever thought possible.

Now I'm wondering where to ride my bike next – perhaps alongside the canals of The Netherlands, or through the city streets of China ...

Profiles

Advertisements

A Wanted: sixth person to share mixed house. Own bedroom, share kitchen, bathroom and garden. Parking space available. Only £275 per month + bills.

B Single parent offers free accommodation in exchange for four hours a day childcare (James, 6, Helen, 8). Hours: 8.30 am – 9.30 am, 3.00 pm – 6.00 pm. Non-smoker. Weekends free.

C Share city-centre 3rd-floor flat with three foreign students. £100 per week, plus electricity. Ideally located for shops, restaurants, railway and bus station.

D House-sit for three months while owner is away in Turkey. Cheap rent in return for answering phone and gardening. Would suit couple. £350.00 pcm, all inclusive.

E Bedsit available from end June. Bedroom-cum-living room, plus kitchen facilities, toilet and shower. Basement, easy access to street. £600 per month + bills.

F Cat lover wanted to share house with young married couple and two cats. Six miles from city centre. Transport needed. £350 inclusive per calendar month.

Christophe Pires is 21 years old and from France. He has driven to Cambridge from his home in Lyons, and plans to drive back there twice a month to see his family and friends. Christophe doesn't like children or animals. He loves meeting new people and making new friends.



Ekatarina Mostovoi is 18 years old and from Russia. She has just left school and this is her first time abroad. Ekatarina doesn't have much money, so she is looking for a very cheap room. She wants to train as a nurse when she goes back to Moscow.



Roberto Costa is a 28-year-old engineer from São Paulo, Brazil. He travels a lot for his job, so English is important to him. This year he has been to Egypt, Turkey and Germany. Roberto doesn't like cooking, so he probably won't spend much time in the kitchen. He wants to visit lots of places while he's in England.



Tomasz Karwan is 23 years old and comes from Poland. His English is already very good, and he hopes to become an English teacher. Tomasz loves plants and animals, and being outdoors. His girlfriend, who also wants to teach English, may come and stay with him in Cambridge.



Dorothea Kahn is a 25-year-old law student from Stuttgart, Germany. Dorothea is in England to improve her English. She also wants to prepare for her law exams while she is here. She doesn't plan to go out much while she's in Cambridge. She will probably spend most evenings at her desk.




Carmen Morientes is an elementary student of English. She is very keen to improve her English and would like to live with an English family. Carmen is 22 years old, and loves animals. She is also very keen on sport. She goes running three times a week, and cycling at the weekends. She comes from Andalucia in southern Spain.




Appendix 6: Part 5 sample text

This page is focused on testing students who intend to sit for the school-leaving examination in English. Therefore, the texts are authentic and not graded. Unknown words are not explained or translated because then the testing material would not meet the goal. Enjoy testing your English skills!



Part 1: A Guinea Pig
 For questions 01-10, read the text about a guinea pig. Decide which word or phrase (A), (B), (C) or (D) best fits each space.
 There is an example at the beginning (00).
 Example: (00) - C



Every language has its own special – 00 - and expressions. Often, they give new meaning to a – 01 - word or phrase. One such American expression is 'guinea pig'. For centuries, scientists – 02 - animals in medical experiments. They use animals to test new drugs and improve methods of operating - 03 - people. One of the most commonly used animals in these experiments is the guinea pig. Someone – 04 - the name 'guinea pig' for the first time might think this was a kind of pig that comes from the country of Guinea in West Africa. But the guinea pig is not part of the pig family. It looks – 05 - a mouse or a rat. Guinea pigs reproduce quickly and resist disease, making them – 06 - for laboratory tests.

The small long-haired animals were – 07 - by the Incas in Peru. They were first imported into Europe from South America in the 16th century. Some word experts say the word Guinea in this case was a mistake in the way the word – 08 - . They say the correct word was Guiana, a – 09 - British colony in South America, now the country of Guyana. And they say it may have been called a pig because of the pig-like, high-pitched – 10 - it makes.

00 A nouns	B notions	C words	D vocabularies
01 A general	B ordinary	C common	D exact
02 A used	B have used	C use	D will use
03 A	B at	C in	D on
04 A hear	B to hear	C hearing	D heard
05 A more like	B much like	C more as	D much as
06 A precious	B valuable	C worth	D priceless
07 A risen	B raised	C grown	D cared
08 A told	B was told	C spoke	D was spoken
09 A past	B former	C last	D previous
10 A noise	B voice	C sound	D cry/shout

Béřešová, Jana. "Language in Use: Multiple Choice, Word Formation and Cloze Test.

Part 1: A Guinea Pig." *Friendship*. Feb. 2010: 13. Print.

Appendix 7: Reading speed – post-test text

Machu Picchu

For centuries, the Inca city of Machu Picchu was lost in the jungle. Then, in 1911, the American explorer, Hiram Bingham, discovered the ruins of the city. It is one of the most extraordinary places in the world with breathtaking views of mountains and a beautiful river valley.

Today it is also one of the most popular tourist destinations. Many people choose to follow the Inca Trail, a centuries-old path of 43 km that takes three or four days on foot. Others take the train and then a bus for the last part of the journey.

Now a hotel company is going to build a cable car to the top of Machu Picchu. ‘The cable car is good news for Machu Picchu,’ says a company spokesman. ‘There are going to be a lot more tourists and that means more jobs for the local people. Looking after the ruins is expensive. With the extra money, we can spend more on looking after them.’

However, the plan is not popular in Peru. Ana Redondo, a tourist guide, explains the problem. ‘There are already more than 300,000 tourists that go to Machu Picchu every year. The Inca trail is crowded and dirty with old tea bags and water bottles everywhere. The new cable car is going to bring 400 tourists every hour! The company is also going to build a large hotel and tourist centre with souvenir shops, fast food restaurants and so on. It is the end of Machu Picchu.’

Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F)

1. Machu Picchu was built in 1911. **T / F**
2. The ruins of Machu Picchu were found by Hiram Bingham. **T / F**
3. The city is extremely popular with tourists. **T / F**
4. The only way to Machu Picchu is on foot. **T / F**
5. It takes one week to get to Machu Picchu when you follow the Inca Trail. **T / F**
6. Ana Redondo thinks there are too many tourists. **T / F**
7. Tourists leave their rubbish on the Inca Trail. **T / F**
8. All people think the cable car is good for Machu Picchu. **T / F**
9. Building the cable car would bring a lot of money to Machu Picchu. **T / F**
10. 400 tourists visit Machu Picchu every hour now. **T / F**