

# Some thoughts on teaching reading for new language teachers

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*In a reading class, the most important thing, according to Adam John Simpson, is that both the teacher and the student understand the reading process.*

## Introduction

This paper concerns itself with reading in the language classroom, i.e. reading to extract *meaning* from a written text (Nuttall, 1996, p. 13). In other words, the text is viewed as a vehicle of communication from the writer to the reader. Aebersold and Field (1997, p. 15) acknowledge this by stating that it is the interaction between the text and reader that constitutes actual reading. However, simply stating that this is what constitutes reading is to risk forgetting that in the reading class, the most important thing is that both the teacher and the student understand the reading process.

In my experience, some of the things that happen in classrooms seem to interfere with reading rather than promote it. Among the most critical is the failure of the learners to apply skills they use in reading in L1 to the second language, thus leading to a misconception that the meaning of the text will simply 'flow' into the learner, (cf. **Figure 2**, Nuttall, 1996). Furthermore, some learners may read extensively in their L1 while others, perhaps due to cultural influences or personal learning styles (e.g. auditory learners who learn best by listening), dislike reading in a foreign language. This consequently affects their approach to a text. There is a constant danger in the language classroom to forget that reading is a process with a distinct purpose, and reading different things requires different approaches and processes. Indeed, as Nuttall (1996) notes: "If the only foreign language items ... read recently were directly concerned with teaching, it may be that you, and your students too, do not really need to read that language except for classroom purposes" (p. 3).

If this is the case, even the avid reader's motivation to read will be low as the purpose for reading is contrived, merely for the language classroom. I have noted in my past attempts to teach reading that motivation can sink when the learner is presented with no genuine reason to complete the activity. This is a particular problem when working with texts in coursebooks which may have been produced so as to offend no one, but also end up of interest to no one.

With these issues in mind, this paper will briefly define the concept of reading in terms of language learning, explore the problems learners have when reading, and offer some practical solutions that I have used in the classroom.

## The reading process

This process is not as simple as it may first appear: there is no guarantee that the meaning which a writer intends to *encode* in a text will be the same as the message the reader *decodes* from it. Reading is not a *passive* process where the meaning passes directly from writer to reader via the medium of the text, but rather an *interactive* process during which the reader extracts meaning from signs on a page and interprets those signs in light of what they know of the world (see **Figure 1** below). It is therefore subject to both *cultural* and *experiential* interpretations by reader and writer. I will discuss this in greater detail when we consider the problems facing the learner during a reading lesson.

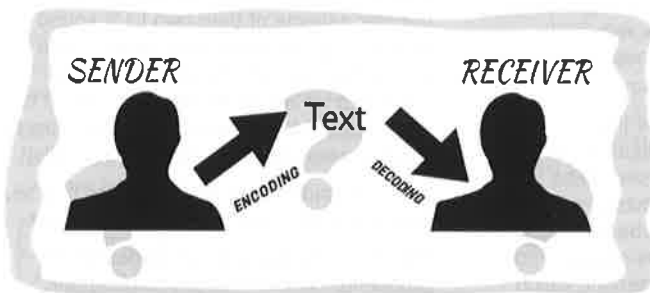


Figure 1: The interactive process of reading, (Nuttall, 1996)

## Different ways for different purposes

Our reasons for reading the football results, for instance, are very different from our reasons for reading a novel. Consequently, the way that a particular text is tackled is strongly influenced by one's purpose for reading. Quickly scanning a page to find someone's telephone number is very different from perusing a legal document. Likewise, there are marked differences in the speed used. Also, people generally read silently, while in some cases, such as in a traditional classroom setting, learners may read aloud. Wallace (1992) identifies three personal reasons for reading: reading for *survival*, reading for *learning*, and reading for *pleasure* (p. 15). Reading for survival would include such actions as reading the cooking instructions on a packet of food. Reading for learning obviously involves reading such things as textbooks, but would also include anything that extends our knowledge of the world. Reading for pleasure involves any reading that is not

done with a specific goal in mind, except reading for its own sake. All of these can be classified as authentic reasons, which require different strategies.

## Reading for meaning

Whatever the reasons for reading (excepting any reading for language learning), it is unlikely that pronunciation or the grammatical structures in the text are of primary interest. In fact, Nuttall (1996) argues: "If we are setting out to teach the language, then we are not giving a reading lesson" (p. 31). People read because they want to get something from the writing. Nuttall (1996) defines this as the *message*: it might have been facts, but could just as well have been enjoyment, ideas, or feelings derived, for instance, from a family letter. Whatever it was, the reader probably wanted to get the message that the writer intended. In the case of second language reading, the purpose hasn't always been to extract meaning.

## Reading in a second language

In some cases the advantages of knowing a foreign language are clear to learners: better jobs, access to literature, etc. Reading is usually recognized as a necessary part of these activities. However, reading in the language classroom can lack the feeling of authenticity, as the texts have been produced for the purpose of language learning and not for a particular reader to extract meaning in the way they would normally do. This is a major problem for many language teachers: the motivation of *needing to read* is powerful. Being able to motivate students by making their foreign language reading interesting is a key issue. As Nuttall (1996) notes: "The language is alive – its users have the same variety of purposes for reading as anybody has when reading their mother tongue – and this fact can be used by teachers to increase motivation" (p. 3). By treating reading as a purposeful activity, it becomes more focused and classes livelier.

## Reading as a skill

The learner's primary reason for learning a foreign language is often to achieve non-linguistic goals, such as functioning at work or surviving in a foreign country (Nuttall, 1996). This is a compelling reason to teach reading as a skill in itself rather than a means to promote language acquisition. Aebersold and Field (1997) suggest we can do this in a variety of ways: "Some actions