
New strategies for improving fifth and sixth form learners Reading comprehension Skills

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Abstract

Through my observation of English classes, I have noticed that the times students are involved in reading comprehension is very little; whereas reading and understanding written text needs learning time, sometimes students fall is due to lack of deficient time, to read and understand a written text. That's why this paper will give strategy and techniques on how to teach reading comprehension class by putting learners in center. This paper highlights new strategies for teaching reading comprehension and gives various reasons justifying its practice in the foreign language classroom. In this connection, the paper suggests a dual approach for teaching reading and understanding written text. The set of pedagogical procedures includes: individual preparation, group preparation outside the classroom, class activities carried on in group, pre-reading activities, while-reading and post reading activities; and homework assignment to choose between a poem reading and appreciation, and creative poetry writing is required.

Keywords: New, strategies, reading, comprehension, skills

Résumé

A travers mon observation des classes d'anglais, j'ai remarqué que le temps que les étudiants sont impliqués dans la compréhension de la lecture est très peu ; alors que la lecture et la compréhension d'un texte écrit nécessite du temps d'apprentissage, parfois les étudiants tombent à cause du manque de temps, pour lire et comprendre un texte écrit. C'est pourquoi cet article donnera des stratégies et des techniques sur la façon d'enseigner la compréhension de l'écrit en plaçant les élèves les plus faibles au centre. Ce document met en évidence de nouvelles stratégies d'enseignement de la compréhension de l'écrit et donne diverses raisons justifiant sa pratique dans la classe de langue étrangère. À cet égard, l'article propose une double approche pour l'enseignement de la lecture et de la compréhension de textes écrits. L'ensemble des procédures pédagogiques comprend : une préparation individuelle, une préparation en groupe en dehors de la classe, des activités de classe menées en groupe, des activités de pré-lecture, des activités de lecture en cours de lecture et des activités de post-lecture ; et un devoir à la maison pour choisir entre la lecture et l'appréciation d'un poème et l'écriture d'une poésie créative.

Mots-clés : Nouveau, stratégies, lecture, compréhension, compétence

Introduction

This article has developed out of my 10 years experience as a teacher of English language teaching (ELT).

Through my observation of English classes, I have noticed that the times students are involved in reading comprehension is very little; whereas reading and understanding written text

needs learning time, sometimes students fall is due to lack of deficient time, to read and understand a written text. That's why this paper will give strategy and techniques on how to teach reading comprehension class by putting learners in center.

Education is crucial to the social, political and economic development of any nation and consequently effective education is very important. Effective teaching strategy is very important because is based on helping children development from one level to another in a friendly interactive in society and to help pupils to be independent. That is to say give learners much time to work by themselves.

Problems with teaching reading comprehension

These are many problems when teaching reading in the Congolese classroom context, such as large classes, noise problem, lack of textbook. Teaching in a large class is not an easy task by the fact that, there are many pupils in the class room. The teacher hasn't the time to give feedback on time and he doesn't have time to work with every learner properly.

If the teacher gives homework, it is difficult for him to give effective feedback for everyone; the correction takes a lot of days.

There is also a noise problem. And another difficulty is the lack of textbooks; and it is also difficult to know everybody's name in large classes. Another problem is the learning conditions or environment which is French, Kikongo and even Lingala, as in Kwilu Province Bandundu town. English is considered to be a foreign language in DR Congo, because it is learned in a formal classroom setting, with limited or no opportunities for use outside the classroom.

Factors of comprehension

WEBSTER (1941) defines the term factors as "the circumstance or conditions that bring about a result; elements or constituents that make a thing what it is". In other words, there are many different factors which influence the understanding of a text.

"The factors of comprehension are any of those factors that happen to influence the comprehension in general to account for personal effort, reasoning, time factor, familiarity with the text at hand motivation interest and background knowledge (NGWABA, 2014)".

Background knowledge has to do with knowledge of the world, common knowledge of the language that is to say grammar, vocabulary, cohesive, device and sense devices, knowledge of macro language function (phatic, emotion, directive, poetic, referential, contextual and metalinguistic) awareness of communication strategies, specially appear for assistance, paraphrasing ((Bialystok, 1990, quoted in NGWABA, 2014), knowledge of efficient technics for reading a text such as, focusing on the title and of 1st sentence of every single paragraph specially a poem, knowledge of the text or poem at hand, knowledge of the topic and knowledge of paralinguistic features, apart from the person effort and reasoning.

Personal effort is "the minimum amount of personal effort of reasoning as well as the trouble, required from a reader or listener to negotiate and understand meaning in a text. And time factors, on the other hand are the number of hours spent in negotiating or working out meaning in a given text. The familiarity is the personal previous acquaintances with a text or knowledge about a text (NGWABA, 2014).

Understanding meaning

Understanding and meaning are two correlated concepts in that you cannot talk about understanding without talking about meaning which are meant to be understood. Understanding can have several meaning :

- i. Understanding has hearing all the words a speaker says;
- ii. Understanding the plain sense of the information a speaker or writer is giving;
- iii. Deducing the meaning on unknown words and phrases by the using the context (RIXON, 1986:1, quoted by NGWABA, 2014)

About text

Another important concept to discuss in relation to this work is that of text. We cannot talk about understanding or reading comprehension without talking about text because what we read is text. It is the reading comprehension of a text. Linguistics distinguishes between text with small “t” and text with capital “T”.

A text with small “t” is a communicative event that contributes to a discourse which is a set of mutually relevant text. And text is defined by its natural occurrence in a context of communication and not by its form or features, which can show tremendous variation. A text with capital “T” is the authentic recorded product of such a communicative event, usually in writing, but also media as pictures, graphics, sound tracks, video and so on (BEAUGRANDE, 1987 quoted in NGWABA, 2014).

Characteristics of text

For RICHARD and SMITH (2019), a text be in spoken or written language, has the following characteristics:

- ✓ It is normally made up of several sentences that together create a structural unit, such as, such a letter, a report or essay.
- ✓ It has distinctive structural and discourse characteristics.
- ✓ It can often only be fully understood for its purpose.

And BEAUGRANDE and DRESSLER (1987) adds that the text characteristics are those standard by which a text shall be recognized as text. Those standards are referred to as standard of textuality, namely cohesion, coherence, situationality, informativity, acceptability, intentionality and intertextuality. Those characteristics could be rephrased as follows:

- 1) A text must contain all the elements of communication;
- 2) A text is communicative and it contributes to a discourse;

3) It is always produced in context connected with other texts, phenomenon which is referred to as intertextuality: the relation that a text at hand has with other previously existing texts which help to understand it. It meets the seven standards of textuality to communicate.

And there are 5 major text types: narrative, descriptive, directive, expository and argumentative

4. Text contains enough clues to communicate satisfactorily, it relies on common knowledge for each understanding.

Strategy for teaching written texts

Teaching reading comprehension is helping learners develop reading skill by focusing attention to text characteristics so that they understand it and communicate with.

An interesting discussion on strategies for teaching text is perhaps by Ngwaba in his book on reading poetry entitled *Exercises in Poetic discourse Analysis* (2013). And based on discussion, the following strategies may help improve 5th learners reading comprehension skill:

1. Assign the text one week before teaching it so that learners take their time to read it at home, find new words, check them in their dictionaries.
2. Underline important words or expressions for students to check their meanings at home before coming to class.
3. Provide various types of comprehension questions so that they learn to answer questions, while reading by themselves.
4. Recommend the use of dictionary (bilingual or lexicon) to check up the meaning of different words. The use of dictionary could be explained by the fact they are learners, and they have poor background knowledge for answering different questions.
5. Reading the title, and focusing attention on the title first, because the title of a text tells us briefly what the text is about.
6. Teach to intensify the oral practice so that they learn to speak the target language. People who understand the spoken

language have also the chance to understand the written structure of some language better.

7. Teach to identify the number of paragraphs in a text. Identifying the number of paragraphs helps also to find out the number of ideas developed in the text since a paragraph develops one main idea only.

8. Teach to read the topic sentence of each paragraph because the first sentence of a paragraph introduces the main idea of text paragraph.

9. New words tend to block the meaning of the text. That is why it is necessary to explain different new words, so that the text may become easy to understand.

10. Teach to read the last sentence of each paragraph carefully because it is the conclusion of text. The last sentence in a paragraph gives the conclusion of that paragraph (Ngwaba, 2017)

Techniques to teach reading comprehension

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (2000) defines a technique as "a particular way of doing something especially one in which we have to learn especial skills".

And the main objective of reading is to understand the text, grasp its gist or its main idea. In this way, a good preparation is required by taking into account (1) a set of pedagogical procedures or steps to follow in order to teach reading comprehension better, that is read, understand, analyze, appreciate, and build up skills, and competencies to handle poem reading better (NGWABA, 2013).

This set of pedagogical and learning procedures are task – based and learner-centred. The focus is on such factors as personal effort, time factor on reading and negotiating meaning, the use of transfer to L1, paragraph and appeal for assistance, familiarity with the poem, and determination to negotiate meaning.

The set of pedagogical procedures includes: individual preparation, group preparation outside the classroom, class activities carried on in group, pre-reading activities, while-reading and post reading activities; and homework assignment to choose between a poem reading and appreciation, and creative poetry writing is required. NGWABA (2015) refers these steps as eight steps pedagogical procedures for teaching.

Outside the class.

Individual preparation at home required

This is the first individual effort required from the individual learners at home whereby each pupil starts reading the poem at home. Here, the learner prepares and tries to understand it the text individually at home. That is to say he/she reads, rereads and checks meaning of new word using a lexicon or even a bilingual dictionary, provided he / she grasps meaning even by translating, or use the context for generating meaning. The main objective of this individual preparation is getting to know about the text by himself or herself: the contents and the comprehension questions to answer before he joins a group for further discussion. Actually the reading of the poem is followed by questions of comprehension to check students' level of comprehension.

Group preparation task at home

The main objective of this group preparation task is to help learners develop the capacity to arrive at a negotiated and paraphrased version of the text and some group negotiated responses. Every learner will have to reject or adopt their initial answers in light of group discussion.

Group work is assumed to be dynamic and formative by the fact that there are more people to read and contribute. This gives every 30 participate an opportunity to learn more from others, said Barners mentioned (BARNERS, in NGWABA (2013).

Setting an example for an effective reading comprehension lesson

This last part is intended to set an example for teaching reading comprehension more effectively; and there are 4 sections to develop: the rationale, the meaning of the poem chosen as text, and a model lesson for teaching a poem.

Rationale for the choice of the text/Poem to teach: “Forgetting to Die Well”

The text to teach is entitled: “Forgetting to Die Well” (2017) by a Congolese poet called NGWABA (1954). And there are many reasons that lead to the choice of this text:

1. First, poetry is a text just like any kind of text / prose, and there is reason why poetry should be taught.
2. Second, it is adapted to the pupils’ need and level.
3. Third, it really is interesting as it deals everyday life problem and experience which is death;
4. It is short, just 20 lines, and it is easy to understand and even memorized.
5. The language is simple, not complicated at all for 5th form learners, enough to capture;
6. It contains useful language structures of everyday usage, such as I met a gentlemen out of a bar, No problem with anyone, or my own money etc.
7. Another reason is that learners have never studied a poem yet so, this will bring a change in the classroom, a shift from prose to poetry.
8. This poem capable of converting learners lives to God the creator because it deals with eternal life.
9. Last but not least, this poem begins with pleasure and ends in wisdom, just as most poems do. The fact that everybody will die one day, and after death, life will continue and there will also have the judgment.

About the meaning of this: “Forgetting to Die Well”

In this poem, the speaker is talking about a gentleman that the speaker met out of a bar drunk, happy and celebrating, and saying that he had no problem with anybody, and that he was eating his own money. He completely forget he could die soon after that without having repented. And when the speaker told him that his life was a mess, the gentleman reacted almost rudely asking him to mind his own business.

Later on, the gentleman told the speaker to come back later and tell him again about eternal life he had mentioned to him only after his mind would come back to normal.

<i>Outside the class preparation sheet before the lesson (one week)</i> Procedures	Materials to be taught
<p>1. Individual preparation The teacher asks each pupil to read a text carefully at home, and after reading that, he will answer the questions.</p> <p>2. Group preparation at home</p> <p>The teacher divided his pupils into group works and gives them instruction for the homework. The teacher draws learners attention to the reading and to difficult words to check in order to ease comprehension.</p>	<p>T.: Here is a new text to read. Copy it exactly the way it and read it carefully at home.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> try to understand the meaning of its different words and answer the following questions of comprehension: <input type="checkbox"/> what is the title of this poem? <input type="checkbox"/> Who wrote it (what’s his name)? <input type="checkbox"/> Where did the speaker meet the gentleman? <input type="checkbox"/> What was the man? <input type="checkbox"/> What question did the speaker ask the gentleman? <input type="checkbox"/> Did the gentleman love his life? <input type="checkbox"/> Is his clean? <input type="checkbox"/> What did the gentleman forget? <p>Teacher: (gives the instructions as follows): there two steps.</p> <p>Step1: read the poem individually at home and try to understand it. Then answer the questions about the text by yourself. Make sure to check up the meaning of difficult words in a dictionary. Use even a bilingual dictionary.</p> <p>Step 2: in groups of four or five and;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> first read the poem in group <input type="checkbox"/> each group is going to negotiate the meaning of the poem together at home <p>1. Read carefully those different questions, discuss and answer those questions. The first sentence of each stanza (a stanza is a group of lines in a poem). While you reading, focus also your attention on the title of the</p>

Inside the classroom

This is the time for the teacher to teach the poem in class, in order to make it clear to students. He explains the entire poem starting by its title, context, the text itself, and its division into stanzas. After his explanation, the class is

broken into groups of four or five. Actually it is the same previous as they worked outside in order to continue the discussion but in class this time.

Pre-reading activities

Here, the main objective is to orient the participants toward the text under study in various ways. The teacher provides them with any necessary background information about the text. He may also help participants create the text scenario. And various questions may be used to activate participant's sub-consciousness.

Ex:

What are the three steps of human's life?

We have birth, growth and what else?

We go to school to prepare for our lives, right? Yes or no?

Can we prepare also our death the way we prepare for our lives on this earth?

If yes, how can we prepare for our return?

Today we are going to read a poem in which the speaker is blaming a gentleman who forgot completely to prepare for his death. The poem is entitled "Forgetting to Die Well". It is written by a Congolese poet.

While-reading activities

Here the teacher reads the poem himself and the students listens to him/her carefully. Then he explains the meaning of the poem as follows:

In this poem entitled "Forgetting to Die Well", the speaker is talking about a gentleman that he met out of a bar drunk, happy and celebrating, and saying that he had no problem with anybody, and that he was eating his own money. He completely forget he could die soon after that without having repented. And when the speaker told him that his life was a mess, the gentleman reacted almost rudely asking him to mind his own business.

Later on, the gentleman told the speaker to come back later and tell him again about eternal life he had mentioned to him only after his mind would come back to normal.

The activities are also very important as others, as far as the teacher will set or provide participants with a model analysis for further information. And here, all learning is essentially based on imitation of models and the teacher

explains starting with the title, and context of the text. Every semantic clue is explained contextually and functionally.

As you can see, the poem is divided into six parts. We call them stanzas (they are like the paragraphs in a prose text). But this not a poem. Each stanza is composed of lines. We call these lines verses.

Post – reading activities

This is the stage when the teacher checks if the lesson was understood by the pupils. The post - reading activities mark the step when the teacher checks whether or not participants understood the text, and are able to arrive at the solutions. One way of doing this is through different questions: recall questions, comprehension questions, application questions, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

Now the teacher asks the same questions he gave the students to prepare at home.

The different groups will have to discuss again the same questions after the teacher's explanations to see how well they got the lesson.

After their discussion, the teacher conducts now a final session of discussion to conclude.

1. Introduction or pre – reading

While getting into the classroom, the teacher will greet his / her pupils. He asks them the date, sends them to write it on the black board and thanks to different questions; the teacher will know whether his / her pupils read and understand the text at home or not. And after asking them those questions, such as: what is the title of the poem? What is the poem is about? He / she will announce the title of the lesson.

2. Presentation or while reading

At this level, the teacher will read the poem a loud, explains every new words or structures which may block the understanding of the poem. After that, the teacher will initiate them to read by themselves, once or twice and he will ask them to read silently the poem under his supervision. Sometimes later, he will write different questions on the chalk board and while finishing, he will read them.

3. Production or post – reading

Here the teacher will check if his / her learner answered the questions he gave them for solving in groups. That is to say, here, the learners should be in group work after processing the time and when they finish, they will negotiate meaning in

groups before giving answers which will be written on the chalk board.

4. Practice

At this step, the teacher will give them an exercise to work individually on a sheet of paper. After that, each pupil will read his/her answer which will be judged by his / her classmates. And good answers will be written on the chalk board by the producers himself.

5. Follow up activities

Here the teacher will ask some questions to sum up the lesson. Such as:

- What is the meaning title of the poem?
- What the poem is about? Write it in 5 sentences.

Conclusion

This article was entitled “New Strategies for Improving Fifth Form Learners’ Reading Comprehension Skills”; and as the title suggests, it deals with new strategies more likely to help improve fifth and sixth forms learners’ reading comprehension skills in order to help them cope with further studies. In fact, reading is the most important by which scholars acquire knowledge from written texts. Reading precedes understanding and interpretation which is why it needs improving.

The work depicted the kinds of problems that those typical learners have in reading and understanding text in English; and focused on how to help them improve their great skill by using appropriate strategies and teaching methodology.

The set of pedagogical and learning procedures used are essentially learner-centered, and task-based, and consisted of assigning the text to read in advance one week before with precise instructions to handle it at home. The class is divided into several groups of four or five learners to negotiate meanings together.

The focus is on such factors as personal effort, time factor on reading and negotiating meaning, the use of transfer to L1, paragraph and appeal for assistance, familiarity with the poem, and determination to negotiate meaning.

The set of pedagogical procedures includes:

1. Individual preparation at home,
2. Group preparation outside the classroom,
3. Pre-reading activities in class,
4. while-reading in class,
5. And post reading activities;
6. Practice

The Individual preparation at home required is the first individual effort required from the individual learners at home whereby each pupil starts reading the poem at home, and tries to understand it individually.

The main objective of this group preparation task is to help learners develop the capacity to arrive at a negotiated and paraphrased version of the text and some group negotiated responses. Every learner will have to reject or adopt their initial answers in light of group discussion.

The text chosen was a short poem entitled “Forgetting to Die Well” that fits for teaching and learning language in that It was short, practical and adapted to the learners’ level and needs; interesting, as it deals also everyday life problem and experience which is death. And the language is simple.

Another characteristics of the language used in the poem is the fact that it contains useful structures of everyday usage, such as I met a gentlemen out of a bar, No problem with anyone, or my own money etc.

This poem capable of converting learners lives to God the creator because it deals with eternal life. I have enjoyed working on this topic on developing reading strategies to cope with texts. And I found the strategies practical. Another thing I am happy to have explored is the teaching and learning of poetry, which a text just as any other text, and it should be taught rather than be continuously ignored in secondary school

because poetry begins with pleasure and ends in wisdom, as Frost said.

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