DEVELOPING READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS OF B1 LEARNERS THROUGH TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract. Many intermediate learners can read a text aloud yet cannot say what it means. This article discusses how Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) can help B1 learners of English move from decoding words to genuinely understanding texts. Using Willis's (1996) three-phase framework, it outlines a classroom sequence in which reading is treated as a purposeful activity with a real outcome. Practical task types, a sample lesson and some assessment ideas are suggested.

Keywords: reading comprehension, task-based language teaching, B1 level, Willis framework, jigsaw reading, EFL

Why reading comprehension needs a new look

Ask a B1 class to read a page and answer five questions, and the usual result is that a few strong students answer while the rest copy or guess. The activity tests reading but rarely teaches it. Grabe (2009) describes reading as a process in which the reader constantly connects the words on the page with background knowledge, predicts what comes next and checks those predictions. Learners at the intermediate stage often skip these processes because they are busy translating individual words.

Task-Based Language Teaching offers a different starting point. Instead of asking "What does the text say?", the teacher asks "What can learners do with the text?" Nunan (2004, p. 4) defines a task as classroom work in which learners are "comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting" in the target language with their attention on meaning. Ellis (2003) adds that a real task has a clear outcome beyond language practice itself, which he calls a "workplan" leading to a result. When learners read in order to choose

a hotel, solve a puzzle or write a recommendation, the text becomes a tool and comprehension becomes necessary rather than optional.

The learners and what they bring

The approach suits learners at B1 level of the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001), that is, secondary school students in the upper grades, college students and adults in general English courses. These learners can follow the main points of clear texts on familiar subjects, but they typically show three difficulties: a narrow vocabulary that interrupts reading, a habit of reading every word at the same slow speed, and little experience of using reading to complete a real job. Because they already manage simple connected language, they can discuss a text in pairs and report their conclusions, which is exactly what task-based lessons require. For this reason B1 is a good moment to introduce task work, since the learners are neither too limited to cooperate nor too advanced to need strategy training.

Choosing texts and skills

Material should be selected carefully. Texts of 250–400 words on topics close to learners' lives, such as study abroad, online safety, sport, food and travel, work best, and they should contain no more than about 2–5% of unknown words so that learners can infer meaning rather than give up (Nation, 2013). Authentic leaflets, short news items, emails, blog posts and timetables are especially useful because they show learners the kinds of texts they will meet outside school.

The skills to be developed are those identified in the reading literature (Grellet, 1981; Alderson, 2000): skimming for the general idea, scanning for specific details, inferring unstated meaning, recognizing text organization and reference words, and guessing unknown words from context. The teacher should name the skill that each task trains, so that learners understand why they are doing it and can later apply it independently.

A task cycle for the reading lesson

The lesson follows the framework proposed by Willis (1996), which divides a task-based lesson into a pre-task phase, a task cycle and a language focus.

Pre-task. The teacher introduces the topic and activates what students already know, for instance with a short brainstorm or a KWL chart (what I Know, what I Want to know, what I Learned). Five or six key words are presented through pictures or quick examples, and the learners predict the content from the title and images. This phase takes about ten minutes and reduces the vocabulary barrier before reading begins.

Task cycle. Learners now work on a task with a concrete goal. A strong option is jigsaw reading. The class is divided into groups of three, and each member receives a different short text about the same subject, for example three different holiday destinations. Learners read their own text, take notes, and then tell their partners what they found. Together the group must decide where a family with a given budget should travel and justify the decision. Since no student holds all the information, everyone must understand their own text well and explain it clearly, which gives genuine motivation for comprehension. The groups next plan a short report, and finally each group presents its decision to the class while the others compare the reasons given. As Willis and Willis (2007) note, the planning stage allows learners to polish their language before they speak publicly, and the report stage gives a natural reason to use new vocabulary.

Language focus. After the task, the teacher draws attention to useful forms that appeared in the texts, such as reference words (this, they, which), linkers (however, as a result) and collocations. Learners analyse these items and practise them briefly. The attention to language comes after meaning has been established, so that form is learned in context.

Other task types

Teachers can vary the lesson with several additional tasks. In a problem-solving task learners read clues from a short text to identify a missing object or person. In a sequencing task they put jumbled paragraphs or pictures in the correct order, which trains awareness

of text structure. In an information-transfer task they complete a table, map or timetable using a text, and in a decision-making task they read advertisements and choose the best offer. A creation task asks learners to write a reply email or a short review after reading, which links reading with writing. Because each task has a different outcome, learners practise a range of strategies without the lesson becoming repetitive.

Assessing progress

Assessment should match the task approach. Besides conventional comprehension questions, teachers can observe how accurately groups complete the task outcome, check the quality of notes taken during jigsaw reading, and use short reading journals in which learners record the strategies they used. A simple pre-test and post-test with different B1 texts after six to eight weeks can show whether comprehension scores improve. Learners should also receive feedback on strategy use, not only on correct answers, so that they become more independent readers.

Possible difficulties

Several problems may appear. Weaker learners may rely on stronger classmates, so groups should be mixed carefully and roles assigned (reader, note-taker, reporter). Teachers who are used to a text-then-questions routine may find task preparation time-consuming, but tasks can be reused with new texts. Finally, some students may use their first language during group work; a brief use of Uzbek for planning is acceptable as long as the final report is in English.

Conclusion

Task-Based Language Teaching gives reading lessons a purpose that traditional question-and-answer exercises lack. By following Willis's (1996) pre-task, task cycle and language focus stages, using jigsaw reading and other outcome-oriented tasks, and selecting suitable texts and skills, teachers can help B1 learners read with more attention, more confidence and better understanding. Future research might compare the

achievement of a task-based group and a traditional group over a full semester in a school setting.

References

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