



USING NEWSPAPER ARTICLES TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' READING SKILLS IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Eleni Bndaka

ebintaka@sch.gr

empintaka@pre.uth.gr

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present a reading lesson which was initially designed for the students of Peiramatiko Senior High School (Experimental Senior High School) of Patras, Greece and more specifically for class A of Senior High School. The main aim of the lesson was to develop the students' reading skills using a newspaper article and help students gain confidence when faced with authentic texts. The planning of the lesson is based on the belief that students should be exposed as much as possible to authentic reading texts so that they are given the chance to encounter real language and not only the made up language of coursebooks.

The Greek Context

English in Greece is taught as a foreign language from grade 3 (age 8) of Primary School up to class C of Senior Secondary School (age 18). In Primary schools except grade 3, the coursebooks used are provided by the Ministry of Education. It is a series consisted of three coursebooks written by a group of teachers under the guidance of the Pedagogic Institute approximately fifteen years ago. For grade 3 of primary school the teacher of every school can choose a book from the free market, because the teaching of English was introduced for this grade only two years ago. For Junior and Senior High Schools the coursebooks used are selected by the teachers of every school from the free market. English is taught three times per week in Primary school, in Junior High School and in the first class of Senior High School while in the second and third classes of Senior High School it is taught two times per week. The teaching periods are 50 minutes each for the Primary School and 45 minutes for the Junior and Senior High Schools.

Apart from this, English is taught in private schools and for those seeking for a job holding a certificate of English language proficiency is sine qua non. Thus, it is obvious the knowledge of the English language holds a prominent position in the job market and it is very much appreciated in Greek society.

At the moment Greece is undergoing a phase of change and coursebooks are being written for Primary schools and Junior High Schools by groups of teachers under the guidance of the Pedagogic Institute.

The Teaching Situation

The learners referred to in this paper are the students of Peiramatiko Senior High School (former Prottypos School of Patras). The level of the students ranges from intermediate to upper intermediate and most of them are highly motivated and ambitious. The school is famous for the high passing score in Panhellenic examinations for the University entrance examinations. Admission to school is decided by lot and not examinations as it used to be in the past but there is some kind of self-selection because of the level of the high standards of the school. The class, the lesson was meant for in the first place, consisted of thirty, 15-year old, monolingual boys and girls. The lesson was first delivered in January 2000 and since then it has been used with various classes with the same aim and for as long as the writer of the article was the English language teacher of the school.

As mentioned earlier there is a coursebook in use selected by the teacher, as prescribed by the Ministry of Education, to match the needs and level of the students' knowledge of the language. However, quite often newspapers and magazines are used to develop the students' reading skills because even upper intermediate students have difficulty and feel uncomfortable when coping with real language either written or spoken because they have rarely been exposed to it. That is why newspapers and magazines are used to familiarize students with authentic sources of reading, retrain them use mother tongue reading skills and make them efficient and independent readers.

Criteria Taken Into Consideration for the Teaching of Reading

Reading is usually defined as the ability to extract meaning from written text. Like all the other skills it has to be taught and developed and the ultimate goal of EFL(English as a Foreign Language) teachers should be to train their learners to acquire strategies in order to read and understand comfortably and hopefully make them efficient, independent and active readers. In the long history of EFL, reading has always played the most important role but until rather recently it meant reading aloud specially written texts, built round a grammatical structure, explaining the unknown words and answering comprehension questions. Developments in sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, psycholinguistics and pedagogy have revitalized both the selection of the teaching materials as well as the teaching approach. An important factor that affected the design of new teaching materials is that there have been changes in the understanding of the nature of the reading process. In the light of the findings of both research and theory reading is no longer viewed as a passive skill or a process of decoding but as an active or better as an interactive one since it is accepted that readers interact with the text while reading

An important aspect which needs to be taken into consideration when designing reading courses is the selection of the text. Reading texts can be authentic, adapted or specially written. The term "authentic text" emerged in the late '70s and it is "an indispensable feature" of communicative approach. (Williams, Moran, 1989: 219) Authenticity has been discussed, questioned and given many interpretations since then. Authentic texts are argued to be more interesting and offer learners an experience of real-

world texts by exposing them to real language used for communication. (Grellet, 1981:7) Although the term has been given a lot of definitions the most widely held one is “any text which has not been specially produced for language learners is authentic” (Davies, 1984: 185) as opposed to adapted or specially written ones for classroom use.

Description of the Article

The article selected to be used for the development of the reading skills is a two-page article-survey published in Daily Mail on November 23, 1999 under the title “So just what’s in your handbag?” On top of the two pages and just under the title appears a big photograph of a woman holding a fashionable handbag. The introduction of the article refers to a recent survey commissioned by Horsham Museum in West Sussex to accompany its exhibition on handbags through centuries. Some findings of the survey are mentioned as for example, how many must-haves the average woman can carry in her bag, the contents, the essentials or less likely essentials of a woman’s handbag etc. The introduction is followed by the interviews of nine women who talk about their handbags. More specifically there is a photograph of every woman and information about her job and marital status. These are followed by the description of every woman’s handbag, there is reference on other handbags the women have in their possession as well as detailed information about the contents of their bags. All these come under the titles: *the bag, other bags, the contents*. At the end every woman talks about her handbag and what it means to her which comes under the title *Leslie says, Jessica says* etc, (the woman’s interviewed) name.

The criteria that were taken into consideration for the selection of the article were; suitability, readability, exploitability (Nutall, 1996: 17). The suitability criterion for the girls is quite obvious as for the boys it was considered that the topic is related to the students’ experience and prior knowledge of the world (Widdowson, 1979: 180; Grellet, 1981: 9). The exploitability of the text was considered to be high due to its length, structure, interesting topic and real language. Finally the readability criterion was considered to be met by the article mainly because of its structure but its length led to jigsaw reading (Nutall, 1996: 209). Each student has to read about three women in the article and then exchange information with the two more students who have the rest of the information. Lexical difficulty was anticipated mainly because students were exposed to bookish English but thought to be challenging for both the students and the teacher.

Description of the Lesson

The lesson is organized and divided into the three classic stages, pre-reading, while reading, post-reading (Appendix I).

The pre-reading questions T₁, T₂, T₃ (Appendix I) serve as warmer and their specific aim is to generate the students’ interest, help them predict the topic, create an interest in it, make them have expectations about the content (Grellet, 1981: 18) and above all provide them with a reason to read (Johnson & Morrow, 1981:89). The pre-reading questions in the worksheet A 1,2,3 (Appendix II) help students to make hypothesis about the content of the article and encourage them to read the introduction of the article in order to confirm or reject because as Goodman argues while reading process progresses decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected or refined (Goodman in Widdowson, 1979: 174).

At this point of the lesson each student is given a photocopy a worksheet and a photocopy of the interviews of three women in the article. As mentioned elsewhere there are nine women interviewed in the article. It is considered necessary that the students be given an awareness of the nature and structure of the article as each student has only part of the article to work on.. Because the students will be asked for homework to produce similar written texts, interviews as well as statistics of their own should be aware of what a survey might require so that they know beforehand what they are expected to do, become involved and be given simulated real life reason (Nutall, 1999: 172; Richards, 1990: 39).

Because of the nature of the article filling grids was thought to be a most suitable, non-verbal, while reading activity. Each student has to read the interviews of three women, scan for specific information and transfer it to grids 1 and 2 in the worksheet (Appendix II). The completed grids are later used to integrate reading with speaking as students have to use them for the completion of grid 3. Activity C in the worksheet requires scanning for question 1 and skimming for the gist through the last part of the interviews for questions 2 and 3. Skimming could be developed only in this part of the article and it was considered necessary that this skill not be neglected since all the previous activities require scanning the text.

The activity devised for the post reading stage (activity D, grid 3) is the completion of a longer grid which requires student – student interaction because in order to be completed students have to seek for information they do not have (Nutall, 1996: 209). Thus reading is integrated with speaking and note keeping. Apart from this, it provides students with the material they need for their homework.

The activities (E a, b in appendix II) designed for homework integrate reading with speaking and writing because as Widdowson suggests (1979: 144) the teaching of language for communication calls for an approach which bring linguistic skills and communicative abilities into close association with each other. More specifically the first activity for homework requires students to interview either their mothers or a friend and fill boxes 4 in grids 1 and 2. Then they have to produce similar texts to the ones in the article using the same titles e.g. the bag, the other bags, the contents etc. The second homework activity requires students to use the information from the grids and their interviews and work out their own statistics.

Conclusion

The lesson described in this paper was an attempt to help the students develop their reading skills through the exploitation of an authentic reading text. Authenticity has been discussed and given many interpretations since it first appeared in ELT. The view held by Grellet (1981: 8) “*authenticity means that nothing of the original text is changed and also that its presentation and layout is retained*” was adopted for the planning of this lesson.

Another aspect that was taken into consideration when planning the lesson was the teacher’s role. Since reading in real life means mainly reading alone silently and for some purpose (Grellet, 1981: 8), the teacher’s role was thought to be more active during the pre reading stage when students have to be motivated, provided with a reason to read and prior knowledge has to be activated. Therefore, it is obvious that this part is more teacher centered but as the reading session progresses the lesson becomes more learner centered and the students are left alone to interact with the text. Also student – student interaction

was given attention and the post reading stage was thought to be the most appropriate for it and so the lesson becomes learner centered with the students interacting and the teacher monitoring their progress. The activities assigned for homework were planned in the light of skill integration because as suggested by Grabe (1991: 394-6) skill integration reinforces learning.

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APPENDIX I

LESSON PLAN

AIM: To develop reading skills using authentic text (newspaper article)

CLASS PROFILE: 30, 15 year-old boys and girls of intermediate level

ANTICIPATED PROBLEMS: Real language (not the kind of language Ss are familiar with from coursebooks)

VISUAL AIDS: Newspaper, photocopies of article, worksheets

TIME: 45 minutes

A. PRE-READING STAGE	AIM	INTERACTI ON	TIME
T1: shows Daily Mail and elicits titles of more English newspapers	To generate interest	T-Ss Ss-T	10 min
T2: shows article and main photograph Ss: predict topic	To predict topic To create an interest on the topic & expectations of content	T-Ss Ss-T	
T3: asks about Ss' mothers' handbags Ss: talk about their mothers' handbags T4: hands out worksheets	To relate topic with Ss' prior knowledge	T-Ss Ss-T	
Ss: read pre-reading questions in wsh and - answer pre-reading questions - read introduction of article to see if expectations were met	To guess and confirm or reject	Individual work Ss-T	
T5: elicits organization of article	To give an awareness of nature and structure of text	Individual work Ss-T	

B. WHILE –READING STAGE	AIM	INTERACTI ON	TIME
Ss: read article to fill grids 1, 2 (except boxes No 4) T6: circulates, offers help, monitors progress Ss: report to class their findings using info from completed grids Ss: read article to answer questions in act. C T8: circulates, monitors Ss: report to report	To train Ss scan for specific info and transfer it to a grid To integrate reading with speaking To scan and skim for meaning To integrate reading with speaking	Individual work T – S S – Ss Individual work T – S S - Ss	20 min
C. POST – READING STAGE	AIM	INTERACTI ON	TIME
Ss: Fill grid 3 (expect box No 10) by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - using info from their completed grids 1,2 - asking two more Ss in class T9: circulates, listens to Ss exchanging info, monitors	To train Ss ask for and give info in order to fill a grid To integrate reading with speaking and note keeping	S-S	15 min
D. HOMEWORK	AIM		
Ss: - fill boxes No 4 in grids 1, 2 and box 10 in grid 3 by interviewing either their mothers, relatives, friends - produce a text similar to the ones in the article under the same heading (HM 1) - fill gaps in HM 2 using info from completed grids	To integrate reading with speaking and writing To provide Ss with a reason to write	S – interviewee Individual work	

Key: T = teacher

S = student

Ss = students

Wsh = worksheet

HM = homework

APPENDIX II

WORKSHEET**A. Before you read.**

1. How many items, do you think, an average woman can carry in her handbag?
2. Can you think of the more likely “essentials” a woman can carry?
3. Can you think of some less likely “essentials” a woman can carry in her handbag?

Now read the introduction of the survey to see if you guessed right.

B. Read the survey and fill the following grids (except no 4)**GRID 1.**

No	Name.	Age.	Occupation.	Kind of bag.	Other bags.	Number of items.
1						
2						
3						
4						

GRID 2

Tick the appropriate box (except no 4)

No.	Name	Books	Lipstick (make up)	Mobile phone
1				
2				
3				
4				

C. Now read again and answer the following questions:

1. What is the less likely “essential” each one carries?
2. How does each one justify the contents of their handbags?
3. How important is the handbag to each one of them

D. You have information about three women in this survey.
To fill the grid that follows you have to ask two more people in class who have information about six more women.(except no 10)

GRID 3

Owner of bag	Number of items	Mobile phone	Lipstick(make up)	Book
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				

E. HOMEWORK

- a.** Interview your mother or a friend and fill boxes no 4 in grid 1 and 2. Also ask them about the importance of their bags. Then produce a text similar to the ones in the survey using the same headings, e.g. the bag, other bags, contents, Leslie says.... Plus a profile in the beginning.
- b.** Using information from your interview fill box no 10 in grid 3 and work out the following:
- 1.The average woman carries_____ must have.
 - 2._____women out of ten carry mobile phones.
 - 3._____women out of ten carry lipstick or other make up.
 - 4._____women out of ten carry a book.

Eleni Bindaka is an English Language School Adviser for English Language State School teachers in Volos, Greece. She holds a BA in English language and literature and an MA in English Language Teaching Methodology. Her job involves visiting schools, observing lessons, providing advice and guidance and training English language teachers.