

Teaching Receptive Skills

How we read and Listen

- When we read a story or a newspaper, listen to the news, or take part in conversation, we employ our previous knowledge as we approach the process of comprehension, and we deploy a range of receptive skills; which ones we use will be determined by our reading or listening purpose.
- Understanding a piece of discourse involves much more than just knowing about the language. In order to make sense of any text, we need to have 'pre-existent knowledge of the world'. Such knowledge is often referred to as 'SCHEMA' (plural SCHEMATA). Each of us carries in our heads mental representations of typical situations that we came across. When we are stimulated by particular words, discourse patterns, or contexts, such schematic knowledge is activated and we are able to recognize what we see or hear because it fits into patterns that we already know.

Reasons for Reading and Listening

- When we read a sign on the highway, our motives are different from when we read a detective novel; when we take an audiotape guide round a museum, we have a different purpose in mind from when we listen to a stranger giving us directions on a street corner. We can divide reasons for reading and listening into two broad categories:

1- Instrumental :

a large amount of reading and listening takes place because it will help us to achieve some clear aim. Thus, for example, we read a road sign so that we know where to go. We read the instructions on a ticket machine because we need to know how to operate it.

2- Pleasurable :

another kind of reading and listening takes place largely for pleasure. Thus people read magazines or spend hours reading newspapers. Others go to poetry readings and listen to Radio.

Top-down and Bottom-up

- In top –down processing, the reader or listener gets a general view of the reading or listening passage by, in some way, absorbing the overall picture. This is greatly helped if the reader or listener's schemata allow them to have appropriate expectations of what they are going to come across.
- In bottom-up processing, the reader or listener focuses on individual words and phrases, and achieves understanding by stringing these detailed elements together to build a whole.

Different Skills

- The processes we go through when reading a novel or listening to a poem are likely to be different from those we use when we are looking for someone's number in a telephone directory, or when we are listening to a spoken 'alert' message on a computer.

1- Identifying the topic :

Good readers and listeners are able to pick up the topic of a written or spoken text very quickly. With the help of their own schemata, they quickly get an idea of what is being talked about.

2- Predicting and guessing :

Both readers and listeners sometimes guess in order to try and understand what is being written or talked about, especially if they have first identified the topic. Sometimes they look forward, trying to predict what is coming; sometimes they make assumptions or guess the content from their initial glance or half-hearing as they try and apply their schemata to what is in front of them.

3- Reading and listening for general understanding (SKIMMING) :

Good readers and listeners are able to take in a stream of discourse and understand the GIST of it without worrying too much about the details. Reading and listening for such 'general' comprehension means not stopping for every word, not analyzing everything that the writer or the speaker includes in the text.

4- Reading and listening for specific information (SCANNING) :

In contrast to reading and listening for gist, we frequently go to written and spoken text because we want specific details. We may listen to the news, only concentrating when the particular item that interests us comes up.

5- Reading and listening for detailed information :

Sometimes we read and listen in order to understand everything we are reading in detail. This is usually the case with written instructions or directions, or with the description of scientific procedures. If we are in an airport and announcement starts, we listen in a concentrated way to everything that is said.

6- Interpreting text :

Readers and listeners are able to see beyond the literal meaning of words in a passage, using a variety of clues to understand what the writer or speaker is implying or suggesting.

Problems and Solutions

- The teaching and learning of receptive skills presents a number of particular problems which will need to be addressed. These are to do with language, topic, the tasks students are asked to perform, and the expectations they have of reading and listening.

1- Language:

What is it that makes text difficult? Is it words or sentences-length?.

Solutions:

- a- One way of helping students is to pre-teach vocabulary that is in the reading or listening text.
- b- Extensive reading and listening: This suggests reading and listening at length, often for pleasure and in a leisurely way. Extensive reading and listening take place when students are in their own.
- c- Authenticity: Authentic material is language where no concessions are made to foreign speakers. It is normal, natural language used by native speakers of a language.

2- Topic and genre:

Many receptive skill activities prove less successful than anticipated because the topic is not appropriate or because students are not familiar with the genre they are dealing with. If students are not interested in a topic, or if they are unfamiliar with text genre we are asking them to work on, they may be reluctant to engage fully with the activity.

Solutions:

- a- Choose the right topics.
- b- Create interest.
- c- Activate schemata.
- d- Vary topics and genres

3- Comprehension tasks:

A key feature in the successful teaching of receptive skills concerns the choice of comprehension tasks. Sometimes such tasks appear to be testing the students rather than helping them to understand.

Solutions:

- a- Testing and Teaching: The best kinds of tasks are those which raise students' expectations, help them tease out meanings, and provoke an examination of the reading and listening passage.
- b- Appropriate challenge: When asking students to read and listen, we want to avoid texts and tasks that are either far too easy or far too difficult. As with many other language tasks, we want to get the level of challenge right, to make the tasks 'difficult but achievable'.

4- Negative expectation:

Students sometime have low expectation of reading and listening. They can feel that they are not going to understand the passage in the book or on a tape because it is bound to be too difficult, and they predict that the whole experience will be frustrating and de-motivating.

Solutions:

- a- Manufacturing success: By getting the level of challenge right (in terms of language, text, and tasks), we can ensure that students are successful. By giving students clear and achievable purpose, we can help them to achieve that purpose.
- b- Agreeing on a purpose: It is important for teacher and students to agree on both general and specific purposes for their reading or listening. If students know why they are reading or listening, they can choose how to approach the text. If they understand the purpose, they will have a better chance of knowing how well they have achieved it.