

## How to Improve Students' Reading Ability

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**Abstract:** Reading ability is very important in our daily life and studies. As most people know, reading ability refers to the reading skills that a reader brings to the text. It is a basic skill for college students including foreign language learners. Reading ability generates learning power that helps students know themselves and others better as well. It is necessary to improve their reading abilities. So the first thing we meet when we are reading is the vocabulary, that is, how to deal with the unfamiliar words will be a very important aspect in our discussion. Next, we must eradicate bad habits and form good ones. Only after this can we go further on critical reading with a higher speed. Finally, there is some advice for teachers, for proper ways of teaching will give great help to students for their improvement of reading abilities.

**Key words:** vocabulary; fast reading; habit of reading; reading ability

### 1. Introduction

As most people know, reading ability refers to the reading skills that a reader brings to the text. These skills include a reader's ability to monitor their own comprehension, decode unknown words and apply fix-up strategies.

The importance of reading ability includes three parts:

First, reading ability generates learning power that helps you know yourself and others better. It also helps you understand past, present, and future more clearly.

Second, reading power activates learning power. An individual with know-how is obviously worth more than one without know-how. It helps you in two ways: getting a better job, and succeeding on the job. Engineers, for example, must rely on knowledge to plan, build, and maintain all varieties of power systems. The knowledge first directly comes from reading.

Third, reading power can also be yearning power, serving as a catalyst for creativity.

### 2. Ways to Improve the Students' Reading Ability

#### 2.1 Deal with Unfamiliar Words

Many students probably consider that their main problem in reading is not having a big enough vocabulary. It has been suggested that a vocabulary of about five thousand words is needed to start independent reading. Students who meet a word they cannot interpret are first likely to ask what it means, which is fine as long as an informant is available, but not practical as the basis for interdependent study. After that, most of the students turn to dictionaries. This is very natural and in some circumstances advisable. But in fact, one of the first things to be said about a dictionary is "Don't use it too much". Students who keep looking up new words read not that effectively. Every time you break off to consult a dictionary, you slow down your reading and interrupt your thinking, which should be following the development of thought in the text. It would be idiotic to ban the use of

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dictionaries, but like many useful tools, they can be dangerous.

We must free ourselves from dependence on a dictionary or an informant. It is essential to realize that we can cope without one, and that it is wasteful to look up every new word, but any students reading for a serious study purpose need to be able to look up new words. For them, they must learn to use a dictionary effectively and with discretion. The first step towards using the dictionary as a tool instead of a crutch is to decide which words to look up---and to accept that they should be as few as possible. Having decided to look up a word, we want to do it quickly and to make the best use of the information in the dictionary. Both skills need training. Some students take much time to find a word in the dictionary; this is particularly likely if their L1 does not use the same alphabet as the foreign language. Exercises on alphabetical order, and on using the guidewords at the head of each page, will help. Even practice in opening the dictionary as nearly as possible at the right page is useful. Such exercises can often be done as races.

Dictionaries vary, so students need to be familiar with the kind of information offered by their own. As far as reading is concerned, by far the most important is the semantic information, together with examples if any. Practice is needed in selecting, from several meanings offered, the one that is relevant to the given text.

## **2.2 Word-attack Skills**

In fact, we don't learn all of our words by being taught them, but most of them were learnt when we meet them in the context. Usually this involved assimilating the meaning gradually, after frequent encounters. In the classroom, students simply don't get enough exposure for this natural assimilation to be possible. Therefore solutions outside the classroom must be found. An extensive reading is the single most effective way of improving vocabulary.

One of the most useful word attack skills is the ability to use structural information to assign meaning to a word.

Two kinds of information are relevant:

- (1) The grammatical function of the word: its place in the sentence.
- (2) The morphology of the word: its internal structure.

By looking at the position of a word in a sentence, we can establish at least its grammatical category (whether it is a noun, verb, etc). This tells us the kind of meaning to look for and is thus a first step on the road to understanding. It is useful for students to be able to label the grammatical categories. What is essential is that they should be able to detangle the structure. Identifying the grammatical function of a lexical item is an important preliminary, which sometimes enables the reader to understand the text sufficiently for his purpose. In any case, it ensures that inappropriate meanings can be dismissed and, when an appropriate meaning is established, it can be slotted straight into its place.

The morphology or internal structure of a word may offer valuable clues to its meaning, so it is well worth learning something about it. In English, this involves the study of affixation, suffixation and bases i.e. roots. Serious work can begin when students have a big enough vocabulary to provide other examples of the same affix, suffix and bases. Students need to know which affixes and suffixes can combine with the bases, which affixes can co-occur, what changes in spelling or pronunciation occur when affixes or suffixes are added, and so on. An analytical approach to morphology pays big dividends in enabling students to work out the meaning of new words.

## **3. Eradicate Bad Habits and Form Good Ones**

We need to treat cautiously some of the faults in reading technique.

First, many students are dictionary dependant, once they meet a strange word they turn to the dictionary immediately, which slows down the reading speed and becomes a barrier in comprehending the text continuously. So the students who have this bad habit must free themselves from dependence on a dictionary. They should learn to guess the word from how its structure is organized and infer from the text as we have mentioned above.

Second, don't vocalizing. Readers should not outwardly vocalize the words they read but pronounce then just below the threshold of visibility. The harmful thing about this style of reading is that the reader is forced to read at the speed his lips mouth the words. This means that he can read only as fast as he can speak, and this is a slow rate indeed. His word-to-word style cuts his potential comprehension in half. Fortunately such a defective form of reading is not difficult to cure. First the reader should read something interesting. Such interesting material will force his eyes to move at optimum speed. Then, while reading, the reader place two fingers in his mouth, preventing the motion of his tongue or of his lips. Another technique for the reader is to force his tongue tightly up against the roof of his mouth and keep it in this position while reading.

Third, minimize regression. One of the tendencies most detrimental to smooth reading is the movement of the eye back to words and phrases that have already once been read. This looking back movement is known as regression. The regressive readers always feel that they just missed something important. They are insure of himself, never certain what they have read, always going back a few words to make sure, thus wasting much of his time rereading what they have missed. Their comprehensive level is low because their rhythm of reading is broken by the constant interruption of regressions. The way to solve the problem is simply, that practice without regressing but forcing yourself to go on the reading. The materials you choose should be easy. After some time, you may then be used to the reading without regression. However, in any case, students should know that difficult material may positively require regressions, so they should not be afraid of regress when the aim is to comprehend rather than speed.

Fourth, throw away the habit of finger pointing while reading. Readers use fingers or a pen to fix their concentration on the word they are deducing. Again, this slows down the reading. They may read only at the speed of the movement of their fingers or pens. A better idea is to use a cardboard if you want to use something to help concentrate. You hold it just above the first line and then, as you read, move it down the page at the desired speed. This focuses the eyes on the line immediately below it and discourages regression. Of course the best way is not to use anything but form the habit of phrase reading. If you can cultivate the habit of rapidly picking up one complete thought unit after another, the eye movement will take care of themselves. Therefore, you can avoid "not see the woods for the trees". An efficient reader chunks a text into sense group, units of meaning each consisting of several words. Each chunk is taken in by one fixation of the eyes. We must learn to take in longer chunks. This also may reduce the need for a word-by-word approach.

### **4. Read at a Super Speed**

Rapid reading is good, but not good enough. Of necessity, you should also know and use three super speeds---surveying, skimming, and scanning. Too many people become poor readers precisely because they set up speed as their sole objective and race through materials without knowing what to look for and without any real purpose. They always read with the same speed or the same procedure because they know no other way. So you can see that it would be very important to train yourself to adopt one set of procedures for regular reading and

simultaneously practice another set of speed reading techniques.

Surveying is specialized technique for getting a mountaintop view of an article, chapter, or entire book. With surveying, you catch a broad, overall picture of basic essentials. It will make you reading easy. When you know in general where the writer is going, you can follow more easily. It will increase your subsequent reading speed. It should also improve comprehension because you catch the essentials and writer's plan. A quick surveying provides an ideal basis for deciding intelligently where to taste, swallow, or chew and digest the material. Then how can we survey? Written communication has certain characteristics that make surveying possible. Usually, the title of an article provides a concise indication of article content. The first paragraph normally suggests more exactly what is to follow. From that point on, major divisions are often marked with sub-titles. Other especially important points are apt to appear in italics, graphs, or tables. Finally, more often than not, the last paragraph will summarize or suggest key implications or applications. So read the title, the first paragraph, all sub-headings, italicized words, graphs, tables and the last paragraph.

Skimming is not the kind of reading you have been told to do to achieve full comprehension, you just past over the text lightly and hastily. Skimming generate your reading speed. It helps you review and keeps you informed. But how can we skim? When you are skimming, you eyes begin to slide down a column of words, names, or figures; you don't actually read each entry. As your glance moves down a page, you are vaguely aware of other words, but you react positively only when the right one comes along. When you do reach the desired point, you read all that is necessary with your normal attention to detail. If you want to develop skimming ability, you must do some drills: set a goal first, and then re-skim frequently when you don't understand until you comprehend the text fully. Skimming drills should be followed by comprehension tests. At last, skim regularly. Once you are accustomed to skimming and have established the habit, it will be proved valuable throughout your life.

Scanning is the special technique you use to find one specific bit of information within a relatively large body of printed matter of all the super speeds; this is the highest gear of all. It uncovers relevant information, accelerates your reading speed and flexibility. There are some ways to scan: If you are searching for a date, you should move your eyes down the page looking for numbers. If you are looking for a person's name, use the inevitable capital letter as an aid. With other problems, use quotation marks, hyphens, or italics. In the other situation, you are looking for something unknown. Here, you won't know until you find it. With practice, you can soon develop outstanding ability to apply the right technique at the right time.

## 5. Conclusion

Most of the reading skills such as how to deal with the strange words, how to find the main ideas, how to do critical reading, and how to comprehend better by various kinds of resources are trained by studying shortish texts in detail. But others require the use of longer texts, including complete books. Of course there are not just two contrasting ways of reading but an infinite variety of interrelated and overlapping strategies. Intensive and extensive reading is complementary and both are necessary, as well as other approaches, which fit into neither category. Not only the English edition of materials. We should read in our daily study and life, but also the Chinese edition is within the scope of materials we should read to broaden our knowledge so that we may feel much easier to understand the English ones while we are reading them. These two approaches are described traditionally as intensive and extensive reading.

Anyway, practice makes perfect. As long as we have done enough practices, we can improve our reading

ability gradually.

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