Introduction: Teaching Reading

Words are all around us, the world and our perceptions of the world are composed of words. The two skills of speaking and reading, although separate activities in terms of the classroom, are linked in the sense that they are essential to the processes of human cognition. What we read develops our lexical awareness, enabling us to communicate in a variety of different ways and levels with other people. Consider for a moment the sheer variety of words that we read, often unconsciously, on a daily basis and how this informs and shapes our lives. From road signs, to ingredients on food packages, to newspapers, emails and text messages. Then consider how this information we have absorbed is then transferred through our day-to-day interactions with the people we encounter. Some traditional EFL methodologies have tended to view speaking and reading in isolation when planning skills-based lessons. A more enlightened approach links the two skills in a range of activities and tasks, from introducing new vocabulary, to developing and reinforcing pronunciation, to encouraging free production in classroom discussions and debates. Below is a list of ten best-practice points to consider when approaching reading lessons. Although there is a place for ‘quiet’ reading sessions, teachers need to be mindful of the need to ensure that their students are engaged with the texts they are presented with and, moreover, to have the required skills to comprehend them effectively.

1) Pitch At The Correct Level
Determine your students’ level of instruction before choosing materials and developing resources. Difficult texts that are hard to penetrate will disengage students rapidly for the simple reason that they cannot understand the words. The pace of the lesson will also be severely affected if the teacher is constantly having to introduce new vocabulary every other sentence. If students don’t understand the majority of the words on a page, the text is too hard for them. On the other hand, if the student understands everything in the text, there is no challenge and no value to the learning. So assess your students’ level by giving them short reading passages of varying degrees of difficulty. This might take up the first week or so of class. Hand out a passage that seems to be at your students’ approximate level (see Smogging and Sniping) and then hold a brief discussion, ask some questions, and define some vocabulary to determine if the passage is at the students’ instructional level. If too easy or too hard, adjust the reading passage and repeat the procedure until you reach the students’ optimal level.

2) Choose Appropriate Material
A further consideration when choosing reading materials is the degree to which the text is appropriate and inclusive for the age group of the class. It goes without saying that a children’s picture book would not be appropriate for an adult class and conversely an article from the business page of a serious newspaper would be of little interest to a class of young adults. An inclusive
text would be one that buys into the common and shared interests of the group, and hence presents material that they can relate to or have some modicum of prior knowledge of.

3) **Build Background Knowledge To Set The Scene**
Developing background knowledge prior to reading is an essential component of successful reading lessons. This can be done via a number of methods, usually through the judicious use of starter and warmer activities. If the text you have chosen to present to the group relates to a particular historical era or event, it is important to spend some time at the start of the lesson ‘setting the scene’. This can be done by an open question and answer session. For example, pinning up a visual prompt of Henry VIII and asking the class if they recognise who he is? What can they tell you about him? What else do they know about the Tudor Kings and Queens? Alternatively, this ‘scene-setting’ can also be done by quick flash quizzes to determine prior knowledge and could be framed within a team game or competition.

4) **Pre-Teach Essential Vocabulary**
It goes without saying that a diligent teacher should familiarise themselves with the text they are presenting thoroughly beforehand. Scan the text and highlight the vocabulary that the students may find difficult to understand. Choose five of the most complex words or phrases and pre-teach them prior to reading. This vocabulary presentation should, however, be brief and emphatic as a lengthy exposition will almost certainly send the students to sleep before the main body of the reading activity has even started.

5) **Sensitise The Students To Different Discourse Patterns**
Most students will be familiar with simple narrative patterns in the form of stories that have a beginning, a series of actions with consequences and a resolution or outcome. Other texts, however, contain more complex and potentially confusing discourse patterns. Newspaper articles differ in their perspectives and structural forms. A straight news item regarding an event that has recently occurred, such as a natural disaster or catastrophe, will simply present the facts, usually in time-specific, chronological order. An article some months after the event may, however, be built around an opinion or argument as to the reasons behind the event and its possible causes. The students need to be able to recognise the differences between these forms of discourse and understand the perspectives that are being presented.

6) **Allow The Students To Work In Groups**
Although there is a place in the classroom for individual reading, group reading can be a powerful and interactive tool. Guided reading groups can provide the students with the opportunity to read aloud to each other, discuss the subject matter amongst themselves and share their own ideas and opinions in a more informal situation. Jigsaw reading activities, where each
group has a different part of the text, encourage cooperation between learners and is a potent method of practising all of the essential skills in one go as the students read, comprehend and then share new knowledge with the rest of the class.

7) Connect New Information With Wider Contexts
Encourage students to position new information within wider contexts of the world around them or their own personal experiences. This can be done by developing project work or setting research tasks between classes as homework. The text could also provide a stepping-off point for other activities such as role plays or personalised writing activities.

8) Provide Extended Practice
Reading lessons should never be left hanging in isolation and should always be reinforced by extended practice activities such as whole class debates, comprehension quizzes or summary writing. Always return to the text at a later date to revise learning and check the new information has been effectively processed and absorbed.

9) Assess Informally
There are ways and means to assess students' learning without appearing to be testing them constantly. If the students are working in groups, monitor each group by listening to their discussions and prompting them with questions and points to consider. It will soon become apparent if the students have misunderstood the text or are struggling to comprehend the key concepts and issues.

10) Assess Formally
There is also a place for formally assessing understanding and comprehension. A formal assessment does not need to be done in traditional test conditions but could be via a discursive essay, or an article rewrite exploring an alternative perspective or argument.

Reading For Specific Purposes (RSP)
English for specific purposes (ESP) is an approach to language teaching which addresses the student's specific goals for learning. Both activities and content are based on the learner's needs which may sometimes differ from the approach used in general English instruction. ESP is mainly designed for intermediate to advanced levels, namely college students or professionals. However, it may be redesigned for those who are at secondary school level. It is important to note that ESP courses assume that students exhibit basic knowledge of the English language. Courses under this programme may vary according to the diverse needs of the language learners.

One of the main issues with ESP courses is that the specific needs of the students are addressed. Business English courses are a good example of ESP and yet the
needs of a sales executive would differ quite radically from those of a health care professional. Under the umbrella of Business English are a wide variety of bespoke courses to cover different professional needs and requirements as well as more generalised business courses which teach formal presentation skills, public speaking and business etiquette. However, often the students on a Business English course will be drawn from a variety of different backgrounds and so it is important to focus on practising key skills and developing proficiency in reading for specific purposes.

A well-structured reading lesson should incorporate all four language skills – reading, speaking, listening and writing – and follow a classic three-part transition between the skills.

**Part One: Pre-Reading Activity**

Establishing interest in the topic the reading text relates to is vital. Visual prompts are a good way to spark off discussion. For example, if the text was an article from the science pages of a newspaper about the exploration of Mars, holding up a picture of the planet and asking prompting questions could get the ball rolling nicely. Do not hand out the text at this stage, simply facilitate general points for discussion.

The second phase entails writing the headline of the text up on the board and inviting the students to make predictions on what they think the article may be about. If the article headline is self-explanatory or too obvious (e.g. China to Launch Space Probe to Mars), write up the headline with some of the key words missing and invite the students to guess/predict what the missing words may be.

The third phase involves pre-teaching some vocabulary. This should focus on a handful of key words and try to elicit definitions from the students or provide examples in context sentences to see if the students can deduce the meaning of the words.

**Part Two: Main Reading Activity**

One sure-fire way of turning students off a reading lesson is to laboriously go through the text as a group, stopping at every difficult word and bombarding the students with masses of new vocabulary. Far better is to provide students with a short series of questions to satisfy and to encourage them to practise skimming and scanning reading strategies.

**Skimming** is used to quickly identify the main ideas of a text. When reading the newspaper, most people do not read it word by word, instead they skim the text. Skimming is done at a speed three to four times faster than normal reading. People often skim when they have lots of material to read in a limited amount of time. There are many strategies that can be used when skimming. Some people read the first and last paragraphs using headings, summaries and other organisers as they move down the page or screen. Others might read the title, subtitles, subheadings and illustrations. Consider reading the first sentence of each paragraph. This technique is useful when seeking specific information rather than reading for comprehension. Skimming works well to find dates, names and places. It might be used to review graphs, tables and charts.

**Scanning** is a technique often used when looking up a name or word in the telephone book or dictionary and can also be used to search for key words or ideas.
In most cases, especially if prompted by pre-reading questions, students know what they are looking for, so are concentrating on finding a particular answer. Scanning involves moving the eyes quickly down the page seeking specific words and phrases. Scanning should also be used when the students are first given the text resource to determine whether it will answer your questions. Once they have scanned the document, they should go back and skim it.

**Vocabulary**

Encourage students to work out the meaning of words by the context of the sentences they are placed in and their relationship to other sentences within paragraphs and sub-headings. A well-balanced paragraph should always start with a topic sentence and so by focussing on this the students should be able to grasp the overall meaning of what is to follow or be expanded upon further. Similarly, well-balanced paragraphs should also conclude with a sentence that links with the content presented in the topic sentence. Ask concept questions to determine if students have deduced the meaning of new vocabulary correctly and grasped the essential points of the text.

**Discourse Indicators**

Another useful strategy is to sensitise students to different discourse indicators. For example, is the text purely factual in nature or are there elements where the author or authors have presented their own opinions or ideas? This can help the students to prepare mentally for any post-reading discussion activities.

**Part Three: Post-Reading Activity**

All reading lessons should be followed up with a post-reading activity or task. As stated in the best practice points above, this could be in the form of an open class discussion or debate, group work to prepare presentations or counter arguments or summary writing exercises.

**Smogging and Sniping Texts**

A useful method for determining the readability of authentic text materials is to use a readability formula. The SMOG method (Simplified Measure of Gobbledegook) is often used in American schools to determine the reading age of textual materials but can be easily applied to EFL teaching materials.

**Using the SMOG Formula:**

Count 10 consecutive sentences near the beginning, middle and end of your material (30 total sentences).

1. Count every word with three or more syllables in the 30 sentences, even if the same word appears more than once.

2. Add the total number of words counted. Use the SMOG Conversion Table to find the grade level.
3. If your material has fewer than 30 sentences, follow the instructions for ‘SMOG on Shorter Passages’ and use SMOG Conversion Table II.

**Word Counting Rules:**
1) A sentence is any string or words ending in a full stop, exclamation point or question mark.
2) Words with hyphens count as one word.
3) Proper nouns are counted.
4) Read numbers out loud to decide the number of syllables.
5) In long sentences with colons or semicolons followed by a list, count each part of the list with the beginning phrase of the sentence as an individual sentence.
6) Count abbreviations as if they were not abbreviated.
7) Do not count verbs ending in ‘ed’ or ‘es’ that make the word have a third syllable.

**SMOG for Shorter Passages (less than 30 sentences)**
Use this formula and SMOG Conversion Table II for material containing less than 30 sentences, but no less than 10 sentences.

1. Count the total number of sentences in the material.
2. Count the number of words with 3 or more syllables.
3. Find the total number of sentences and the corresponding conversion number in SMOG Conversion Table II.
4. Multiply the total number of words with 3 or more syllables by the conversion number. Use this number as the word count to find the correct grade level from Table I.

**SMOG Conversion Table I**
(for longer materials) Word Count   Grade Level
0 – 2       4
3 – 6       5
7 – 12      6
13 – 20     7
21 – 30     8
31 – 42     9
43 – 56     10
57 – 72     11
73 – 90     12
91 – 110    13
111 – 132   14
133 – 156   15
157 – 182   16
183 – 210   17
211 – 240   18

THE TEFL ACADEMY
A WORLD OF OPPORTUNITIES
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Number of Sentences</th>
<th>Conversion #</th>
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SMOG Conversion Table II
For example:
A text that contains 10 sentences which in turn contain 31 words of 3 or more syllables has a reading age determined by the following formula:

\[31 \times 3.0 = 93\]
which corresponds to an average reading age of 13 years or above. A reading age of 13/14 should be suitable (depending on subject matter) for an intermediate/upper-intermediate-level class of adults or young adults.

Task 6A
Using the SMOG formula, read the following article on Prime Minister David Cameron’s trade delegation visit to China. What is the readability age for the text and which level should it be pitched at: intermediate, upper-intermediate or advanced?

Salesman David Cameron has sold our principles down the Yangtze

David Cameron is returning home from China a ragged prime minister, stripped of dignity and stained by scandal. The UK’s salesman-in-chief, as Cameron is interpreting his job on the global stage, has already skewed his statesmanship towards £££ with an almost fanatical promotion of this country’s trade prospects. His latest trip to China expanded on that theme and took it to bloated new proportions. This was the largest trade delegation yet – and the most embarrassing, too. Britain, the Chinese leaders will have concluded, is more interested in money than principles.

Cameron did himself no favours by giving opportunities to his father-in-law, Viscount Astor, to promote media rights firm Silvergatemedia. The cronyism charges were only intensified when it emerged Lord Chadlington, another Oxfordshire neighbour of the PM to add to the list, was also present. Team Cameron’s goal was to try to persuade as many Chinese businesses as possible to invest or trade in the UK. They set about their work with aplomb – but in doing so paid a price.

China’s terrible human rights record was put firmly on the backburner, for example. The issues were discussed, No 10 insists, but it didn’t seem like there had been any real thrust to the talks. Then came a row over censorship as Rob Hutton, the Bloomberg lobby journalist, was denied access to a press event. Bloomberg’s crime is reporting on the spending habits of China’s wealthy leaders. Downing Street issued an official protest, but took the matter no further.

Britain, the Chinese leaders will have concluded, is more interested in money than principles.
This may explain why the UK is being held with such contempt by an editorial in China’s Global Times newspaper, a mouthpiece for the regime. Here’s what it had to say:

“The Cameron administration should acknowledge that the UK is not a big power in the eyes of the Chinese. It is just an old European country apt for travel and study. This has gradually become the habitual thought of the Chinese people.”

Ouch! What a contrast with Chinese premier Li Keqiang’s talk of an ‘indispensable partnership’.

While Cameron will have accepted the handshakes of his counterpart gratefully, he will have wondered quite how sincere the smiles which accompanied them really are.

Britain’s place in the world is in flux at the moment – especially after the humiliating defeat of the prime minister over the Commons’ intervention in Syria.

And it’s not just China which views the UK as a country continuing to decline from its days of empire. Back in September an unnamed aide to Russian president Vladimir Putin declared that ‘no one pays any attention’ to the ‘small island’ of Britain any more.

The superpowers of the 21st century are all drifting away from the UK. Even America is gradually moving away from Britain, as it focuses its attentions on emerging economies like India and Brazil.

Cameron is fond of looking at the world through the hashtag lens of a ‘global race’. It views diplomacy as a brutal competition in which the winners are the ones which get the most trade from the rest.

Diplomacy is about more than just money, though. Power is about defending principles – that’s why Britain has punched above its weight for so many years.

By forgetting that, Cameron’s relentless salesman approach brings Britain down to everyone else’s level. It’s not a very pretty sight.

Group Writing Tasks

Getting students to write in English, especially young adults, is difficult. If you put yourself in their shoes for a moment it isn’t hard to understand why. As if learning grammar and vocabulary as a means of verbal communication wasn’t difficult enough, throw in spelling, punctuation and sentence structure (especially if their L1 does not follow the subject – verb – object structure of English); it’s a big ask.

However, there are ways to make writing lessons or writing aspects of lessons fun without subjecting your students to too much stress.

Typically, writing activities fall into three broad categories:

- **Warm-up/Lead-in Tasks**

  These activities are short, quick game-like writing activities that are designed to get the students thinking and writing, often without realising. These activities can be used to generate ideas for longer tasks.

- **Controlled Practice Tasks**
These activities are slightly longer tasks and are often teacher-directed and involve writing frames or prompts or problem-solving activities.

- **Free Practice Activities**

These activities require the student to take the lead and organise their own ideas and use their imagination. The teacher input is usually in the form of error correction and providing essential vocabulary and eliciting ideas/brainstorming.

**Examples of Different Types of Writing Lessons and Activities**

**Consequences/Circle-Writing Activities**

The following activity combines elements of controlled practice and free practice and can also be used as a lead-in to longer writing activities.

Divide the class into roughly equal groups of four to five students and get them to sit in a circle and give them all a sheet of plain paper. Ask them to write the name of a male celebrity on the top of the sheet and the word ‘met…’ and fold the paper towards them so as to conceal what they have written before passing their sheet to the student on their left side. Next ask the students to write the name of a female celebrity before folding the sheet again and passing it on. At this point, direct the student to a prepared writing frame written on the board for the subsequent phases of the game. After each phase the student folds their sheet and passes it to their left. A typical writing frame may look like this:

1) Name: (Male) Celebrity met….
2) Name: (Female) Celebrity
3) (choose a preposition and a place) at/in/on
4) He said: I have been (….ing)
5) She said; I have been (…ing)
6) And the consequence was……..

The beauty of this exercise is that it can be used to revise/introduce different bits of grammar through the back door. In this instance the use of the present perfect continuous, but it can be adapted to any tense, conditional or even to practice reported speech. Phase six (‘and the consequence was…’) invites the students to use their imagination and write freely. Once all the stages have been satisfied the students unfold their sheets and share their stories. Often of course, the stories are amusing gobbledegook but what is surprising is how often they have, through random thought and association, made surprising sense.

As a follow-up activity, students can choose the best stories and write them up in continuous prose as an article in a gossip column/magazine.
There are lots of variations and adaptations on this collaborative writing game and they are all powerful methods to get students thinking and writing (and speaking and listening when they share their stories), often without realising as they are having fun.

**Text Message Translation**

Teenagers are addicted to their mobile phones and often seem unable to function without them. Mobile phones are the bane of most teachers’ lives, a constant distraction for the students and often the cause of much low-level disruption and discipline problems in the classroom. However, there is a way to embrace new technology in the following fun and easy exercise.

Write a text message using text-speak abbreviations up on the board and ask the students to decipher it and write it in plain English as quickly as they can. For example:

‘Hi mate, R U comin 2 d pRT on Saturday? I don’t knO wot 2 wear, NE ideas?’

(Hi mate, are you coming to the party on Saturday? I don't know what to wear, any ideas?).

This activity could be done as a team game to get the students speaking and collaborating on their translations. The website transl8it.com has a free text translation engine for those teachers perhaps not au fait with text-speak where messages can be typed in plain English and converted into text message parlance.

In the example above, the text is composed of two questions. As a follow-up activity, students could write replies in text-speak and challenge each other to write translations.

**Instructions/’How To’ Videos**

The following controlled practice activity is great for teaching transitional writing phrases and for the students to practise sequencing their ideas.

Show the class a short Internet video which offers a step-by-step instructional guide to a particular task. Cookery demonstrations are an excellent resource but there are thousands of other instructional videos on sites such as e-how and YouTube. Just make sure that whatever task is explained has clearly demarked steps and stages. Show the video twice and ask the class comprehension questions/concept questions to check for understanding. Elicit the sequence of steps whilst pre-teaching transitional phrases such as ‘to begin with’ and ‘after that’, ‘most importantly’ and ‘finally…/last but not least’, etc. Show the video one final time and then ask the students to write the instructions out in their own words, stage by stage.