

## **UNIT FIVE COMMENTARY**

### **READING SKILLS**

1. This longer unit will take at least a day and a half if you give enough time for an effective workshop and depending on how the discussions develop. The sample text used has been written by me based on an actual news story. For copyright reasons I cannot publish here all the texts you will need in this session. This has the advantage of making you find texts appropriate for your particular course participants. The principles and techniques presented here apply whatever texts you use as long as they are at the right level, are of sufficient interest and can provide the teacher and the learners with things to do.

This unit focuses on a more strictly communicative approach to reading than your course participants may be used to. This approach presents reading as an activity carried out not for its own sake, but as one element in a sequence of events in which a text plays an important role in achieving a desired outcome.

2. This first session before the mid-morning break should be conducted as a “reading lesson”. The text can be used as the basis for a lesson with intermediate-level students or higher. Make sure the course participants understand that you are going to conduct a lesson with them and that all discussion of methodology or technique will be left until afterwards.

Follow the lesson plan carefully: it has been designed to be very different from the standard type of reading lesson that most teachers have traditionally been trained to carry out. Avoid any long drawn-out introduction. As soon as the course participants are in their working groups, present the context for the activity, tell them about the notes they should make and give out the text. Make sure the context is clearly understood. They must know WHY they are being asked to read the text. To ensure co-operation make them share copies of the text – they can each have their own copy at the end of the session.

During the reading, discussion and note-taking you will circulate and be available to answer questions.

When you estimate that they have made sufficient notes move to the next stage where each small group joins another to compare notes. This is, of course, a discussion session. They should not merely exchange pieces of paper and read each other’s notes.

The whole class session will not be necessary if the course participants have asked enough questions during the earlier stages. This is not a time for “comprehension questions”. Your only concern is whether there may still be elements in the text that some readers have not understood because of strange or unusual expressions and terminology.

If, during the story development stage a group is finding it difficult to agree on a storyline, you may find it helpful to suggest they divide into smaller groups.

Make sure you have plenty of time for the final feedback when groups present their stories. Encourage applause, reaction and comment.

3. This activity is purely descriptive. You want to be sure that the course participants know exactly what happened: what *you* did and what *they* did. The discussion about *why* things were done in a particular way comes later.
4. At this point we want to get the course participants to reflect on the lesson they had as a preparation for the detailed interactive presentation that is to follow.

The aim of the lesson was to get the students to complete a task – create an outline story for a film. In order to complete this task they first had to read and understand a text and extract relevant information. It is important for course participants to understand that the aim of the lesson was not to read the text. The text was used to stimulate the creation of a film story. It was chosen because it seemed capable of doing that and because we wanted the creation of the story to depend on the effective comprehension of a text.

At the same time, in the context of the language course as a whole of which this lesson might have formed a part, we can see that an underlying, more general, aim of the lesson was to organise an integrated language practice session involving relatively realistic reading practice, a great deal of discussion and some writing.

As to feedback of what the course participants got out of the lesson, your job is simply to listen to and note their comments. As students, I hope some of them will claim to have had an interesting experience involving a lot of interaction in English and some feeling of satisfaction at having produced something original and personal by the end. You may find that you get into an interesting discussion about the relationship between language practice and language learning. Are they separate or are they the same?

As teachers, we hope that they principally realised that the use of texts in the classroom does not inevitably mean ploughing through a text together followed by comprehension questions.

5. This is where we present a view of Reading as a real-world activity within an overall Communicative attitude to language use. We want the course participants to examine Reading as a human activity that takes place in the world outside the classroom and to consider how the results of that examination can provide directly practical assistance in the organisation of classroom activities.

We are applying here a powerful overall approach which provides insights into and practical assistance with the development of classroom activities relating to those major forms of language behaviour that are generally characterised by terms such as Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing.

6. First we want to focus on getting a clear and realistic understanding of what people in the real world (as opposed to the world of the classroom) actually read. One way to do this is to ask the course participants to think of something they read the previous evening after leaving work. Then make a list of all the text types they give you. After this you can ask them to tell you

what other things people read. You should end up with a list that includes at least:

- newspaper report/article
- letter
- novel
- story
- poem
- note/message
- TV. schedule
- what's on at the cinema
- recipe
- timetable
- students' homework
- advertisement
- road sign
- food package
- instructions for putting something together

If these are all things people read in the real world then it follows that these are the types of text that should be included in any reading development programme in the classroom. You could now find out from your course participants to what extent this range of text-types features in their own teaching materials. Or is it still the case that "reading texts" generally consist of a series of well-formed descriptive and narrative paragraphs?

7. The second question is: "Why do people read?" Start this discussion by asking the course participants why they read the things they reported reading the previous evening. These reasons for reading are often very precise:

"I wanted to bake a cake so first I had to read the recipe.";

"I had to mark my students' essays."

"I wanted to find out what time a particular programme was starting on television."

Often they can be much less precise:

"The headline in the newspaper caught my eye so I read the article."

"I read the magazine to relax."

It is possible, of course, to read things by chance, but in general it is possible to see that reasons for reading fall into one of two categories: reading for information or reading for entertainment, always remembering, however, that you might start off with one reason for reading and end up with a different, or additional, one.

The important thing to remember from all of this is that there is always a reason for reading and that this will affect how the reader reads and what happens afterwards.

8. Another important factor relating to reading in the real world is the reason for writing the text. There is always a reason why the text was produced and this reason may or may not relate directly to the reader's reason for reading it and to what the reader may do as a result of reading it. One person might read a railway timetable because they want to travel to a particular place while

someone else might read it because they have to meet someone arriving in their town. An advertisement might be written to persuade the reader to buy a particular product, but the result could well be that the reader decides that the product is not what he wants.

Ask the course participants to suggest why the things they read were written and see to what extent those reasons reflect their reasons for reading.

9. You can begin again by asking your course participants to think about how they read the thing they reported reading the previous evening. Did they read it quickly or slowly? Once or several times? In one go or a section at a time? Did they start at the beginning and read through the text line by line, sentence by sentence? Did they run their eyes over the text until they found the words they were looking for? Were they sitting down, standing up or moving around? Did they start at the beginning or at the end?

Most teachers are now aware of terms like “skimming” (getting a quick, general, overall idea of what the text is about) and “scanning” (quickly looking for specific information in a text) and intellectually, at least, they know that not all texts are read in the same way. How much this awareness feeds into classroom practice or leads them to choose texts types that allow for different ways of reading is open to doubt.

The important thing now is to remember that how you read a text is related to what type of text it is, why it was written and what your reason for reading was. You should be able to show this four-way relationship working for the course participants texts.

10. The question to ask your course participants is; “What happened as a result of your reading the text you read yesterday evening?” Possible answers might include:

”I watched the TV. programme I wanted to watch.”

”I talked to my husband about the fire that was reported in the newspaper.”

”I wrote a note to a student about her essay.”

”I baked a cake.”

We are talking here about actual results of the reading that your course participants did the previous evening. You will have to push them beyond the immediate post-reading result which in most cases consists of some form of knowledge. So when someone tells you that after reading a report in the newspaper they knew about a fire, you must push them to tell you if there was anything they *did* having gained that knowledge. Did they just think about it? Did they talk about it with someone? Did they ring someone up to find out if they were all right? Did they sit down and make a list of things they needed to do to protect their house from fire? There are many potential results from reading any particular text and they can take many forms from a feeling of pleasure to eating a slice of cake. It might be worth pointing out to your course participants at this point that one thing people rarely if ever do after reading something is answer a series of “comprehension questions”.

The result of reading is closely tied to the reason for reading. You can use the course participants’ own examples to demonstrate this:

- they wanted to watch a particular programme on TV; they read the TV schedule in the newspaper and the result was they watched the programme;
- they wanted to find out what was going on in the town; they read about a fire and they talked about it with their husband/wife;
- they wanted to make a cake for their daughter; they read a recipe, made the cake and enjoyed eating it with her.

Finish by drawing together the five essential questions:

- What is the text type?
- Why would somebody read this text?
- Why was the text written?
- How would somebody read the text?
- What might the result be of reading the text?

Asking these questions can feed directly into the creation of effective classroom activities. This is something that we will turn to next.

11. Having looked at what is involved in reading in the real world. We now want to see how we can use what we have learned to help us create effective classroom activities that will help students develop their reading skills.

First we want to get the course participants to focus on the concrete example of the lesson they had at the beginning of the day. In the feedback discussion, go through the lesson and get comments on what happened and how similar or different each stage was to what they are used to. In the unlikely event that all your course participants are accustomed to using texts for communicative rather than purely linguistic purposes you can use the example lesson to reinforce this approach. It is more likely, however, that you will find it useful to present the Handling Texts handout in order to point up the difference between a more traditional Linguistic approach to handling texts in the classroom and a more Communicative approach.

As you can probably tell, the handout is a printed version of two overhead projector transparencies. I am assuming that you have no access to equipment of this kind so I suggest that you tear the sheets in half and deal with Handling Texts 1 before giving out Handling Texts 2. (If you have an overhead projector; if there happens to be electricity today; if there is a working bulb in the projector and if you have been able to copy the handout onto transparencies then you are truly blessed and you might be able to use the handouts in their original transparency form, but I would not count on it if I were you!)

Handling Texts 1 is labelled "The Linguistic Approach" because it represents the traditional approach in which reading is done for its own sake. You read a text in order to read a text. Your main interest is in the words and grammar of the text and you read the text for the reasons contained in the WHY? Box.

The types of text typically read for these purposes are listed in the WHAT? Box and the main focus for lessons following this approach is described in the FOCUS? Box.

Handling Texts 2 presents a more communicative approach in which a text is approached in a way more closely reflecting how texts are handled in the real

world. Reading is undertaken because the skill needs to be developed and because the activity contributes to overall language development, but no individual text is dealt with unless it has some value and interest that makes it worth reading and which means that it will give rise to worthwhile activities involving language use arising as a direct result of reading it. This means that a wider range of text types will be used and they will be more realistic. The use of the word “authentic” in the WHAT? Box may give rise to some worthwhile discussion here. A strong view would be that you can always use authentic texts if you choose wisely and if you carefully control what you ask students to do with them at different stages in their development. A weaker, but perhaps more generally accepted view would be that there are levels below which authentic texts can rarely be used and so it is reasonable to engage in some adaptation. You can always, however, make an effort to use authentic formats and lay-outs so that even relatively low level students can experience authentic-looking timetables, advertisements and public notices, for example.

The FOCUS? Box is vital for grasping this more communicative approach. By emphasising the importance of the whole text we recognise that as well as there being a reason for reading a text, there is also always a reason for *writing* it. The text was written for a reason and how we deal with it and what we do with it should relate in some way to that reason. As we shall see in a moment, not only is it important that what we do in the classroom *should* be related to the reason for writing it, it is important to grasp that understanding what that reason for writing the text might have been together with our reader’s reason for reading it provide us with a firm basis for working out how to handle that text in the classroom.

12. We have not spent all this time in this unit talking about reading within a communicative approach to language learning in order to end up with a satisfying theoretical grasp of the issues. The questions we asked about the nature of reading in the real world provide us with a checklist of factors that feed directly into the process of lesson planning. The five basic factors are:
  - i. The text type
  - ii. The reason for reading
  - iii. The reason for writing
  - iv. The way of reading
  - v. The result of reading

Expressing these five factors as questions enables us to draw up what I call a “Communicative Profile” for any particular text. The answers to these questions will suggest activities for inclusion in a lesson. You will see that apart from the question of text type they all require the use of the teacher’s imaginative skills.

13. This is the time to put the questions (see the unit plan) on the board in order to ensure that the course participants can carry out the group exercise.

You will have to find appropriate texts for your course participants. They should be of different text types in order to ensure different kinds of responses to the four questions. You might, for example, have a newspaper article, an official letter and an advertisement.

You may well find it necessary to push the course participants from rather general, if not vague, answers to more precise and practical ones. For

example, having looked at an advertisement for a safari holiday in the Serengeti, participants on one of my courses said that it was written to give the reader some information about a holiday and it took some pushing to get them to acknowledge that beyond that was the aim of *selling* a holiday to the reader. And when it came to considering the results of reading they came up with the possibility that the reader might be interested in the holiday, but they had to be pushed to go beyond this to more precise suggestions for what the interested reader might then *do*, such as telephoning the company for more information, filling in and sending off a form requesting more information, discussing the holiday with their family, looking at other advertisements to compare prices and itineraries, working out how to save enough money to afford the holiday, and so on.

Appropriate reasons for reading will suggest possible ways to introduce the reading activity to the class and together with the text type and the reason for writing will suggest ways to organise how the class reads the text. In order to come up with answers that will help us create effective classroom activities to follow the reading of the text, we need to make sure our course participants can go beyond statements about feelings and knowledge to suggestions for what readers might actually do having read a text. Drawing up an appropriate Communicative Profile for a text will ensure that there is coherence to the lesson planning, linking the text type, reasons for reading it and why it was written with the way it is read and the things done as a result of having read. We want students to be engaged in communicative activities that they could not carry out without first having read and understood a text. In this way we place reading practice in a realistic context of use leading to the development of overall language skills.

14. You should try to find new texts for the workshop so that the course participants are able to start from scratch to produce a lesson plan. I find it saves a lot of time if you do not give groups a choice of text to work with. If you have a variety of texts available and invite each group to choose one blind (pick a card!) they will be able to get down to work more quickly. You will have to monitor carefully their Reasons and Results. Make sure they are practical, realistic and relevant. Watch out for groups falling back on writing sets of comprehension questions. For this workshop it would be a good idea to ban comprehension questions completely in order to force course participants to focus on communicative activities.