



## CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

*CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.*

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### **Teaching Reading: Skills and Strategies**

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This is the third in a series of articles on the teaching of reading to students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The articles provide descriptions of the four most common ways in which EFL reading is generally taught. I describe the prominent features of the four approaches, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses.

The first article discussed *grammar translation*, in which students are taught to read texts written in English by translating them into the students' first language. I concluded that article by claiming that is important in teaching EFL to make a distinction between translation and reading. Often both are important skills for English as a foreign language students, but they learn only one, translation.

In the second article I focused on *comprehension questions and language work*. This approach centers on a textbook containing short passages that demonstrate the use of foreign-language words or points of grammar. These texts, short enough to encourage students to read them word-by-word, are followed by comprehension questions and exercises. Reading authorities do not consider this approach to be a viable way to teach FL reading, primarily because the goal is to gain knowledge of the grammatical structures of the foreign language, and not reading.

I discuss, in this third article, a very popular approach, skills and strategies. This approach focuses on the skills exhibited by fluent readers, and the strategies that readers use to comprehend a text. Generally, a skills and strategies reading lesson begins with the teacher preparing her students to read a one or two-page passage from a textbook by providing any knowledge that they might need to understand the reading passage. This often involves pre-teaching certain vocabulary items that appear in the reading passage. Students then read the passage silently at their own speed while keeping in mind two or three "while-reading" questions, the answers to which they will find in the passage. After reading, the students share their answers to these questions, perhaps in pairs or small groups. Students then complete various tasks or exercises that require them to demonstrate a global comprehension of the passage and their grasp of particular reading skills or strategies (e.g., finding the main idea; making inferences; guessing the meaning of an unknown word by using context clues).

In the past 30 years, a skills approach has become popular for several reasons. First, it gives teachers something to actually teach. In the translation or comprehension-question approaches, teachers can really only help students with the language of a particular passage in order to facilitate the reading or translating of it. The promise of skills and strategies is that, through sharpening students' reading skills and teaching strategic reading, teachers can directly impact the way students read. But this promise rests on the questionable assumption that



students transfer what they learn in the reading classroom to reading done outside the classroom. This has not been shown to happen.

The second reason for its popularity is its superficial appeal to generally accepted theories of reading as an interactive process: by supplying background knowledge, teachers can help foreign language readers interact with a text as fluent readers do. Unfortunately, valuable class time is devoted to giving students the background knowledge they need to comprehend passages, time that might better be spent in doing the one thing that most reading experts agree is the most important activity in learning to read—*reading plenty of material that is interesting to the students and is well within their linguistic grasp*.

In addition to not giving students time to reading, the skills and strategies approach has another problem. In general, it is used only by teachers who are first language readers of the foreign language. For example, many Korean EFL teachers do not feel comfortable with a skills and strategies approach because they feel they do not have the reading ability in English that is necessary to teach the different skills and strategies.

This brings us to a very basic difficulty with a skills and approach. It is really only appropriate for students who can already read. Christine Nuttall, who wrote one of the most influential books on FL reading skills, cautions in that book that the focus is “on ways of developing the reading skills of students at an intermediate level” (1996, p. 19). So, before we can teach FL students reading skills and strategies, we must help them become readers in the FL. That is the focus on the fourth and final article.

### Reference

Nuttall, C. 1996. *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language*. (2nd edition) Oxford: Heinemann.

*Please take the time to give us the addresses of anyone else you think might be interested in receiving this newsletter of the CAPE Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk. And don't forget to write us with any comments you might have. Mahalo!*

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