

READING IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND RELATED ISSUES

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The present paper is an overall discussion on Reading in English as a Foreign Language in Algeria. The authors try to explore some of the causes underlying reading difficulties and the sources of these difficulties. The overall conclusion is that these difficulties stem from not only the learners' lack of incentives and motivation for reading that neither the school nor the social environment seem to offer, but also from the way and the tools (textbooks, in particular) Reading Comprehension is taught in our schools in general.

The school is in charge of providing the pupils with some basic knowledge that they will use later on in their life. However, there is no good education without a sound learning. In order to approach the reading problems at stake in this paper, it is necessary to have a general view of the teaching of English at secondary school level.

In secondary schools the teaching of English is graded as follows: There are three levels.

The first level consists of a “**Tronc Commun**” (common core) where scientific, technological and social science streams are put together. At this particular stage, pupils are taught the basic structures of English together with a limited vocabulary. The topics often refer to pupils’ daily life activities and their social environment. The syllabus is built up around functions such as describing, narrating, questioning, and the like. Different forms and functions of English are taught so as to enable the learner to use them in real life situations. At the end of first form, the pupils are oriented towards streams according to their results.

Stage two is basically a consolidation of what has been taught in stage one. Focus is on authentic passages for reading comprehension. This is particularly true for learners in the technological streams so that they achieve mastery in reading technical documentation.

In the third form, pupils work on passages that are relevant to their stream: literature, science or technology. At the third year level, the pupils are supposed to be able to communicate with a relatively sound fluency in English as they are thought to have acquired (and mastered) the language forms and functions that are necessary for communication in English. In fact, the syllabus includes themes for study that “force” the learners to discuss and, by the same token, to comment on the themes in question.

At the end of the school year, the pupils take the Baccalaureate Exam. This is written exam in nature that requires reading skills in the first place. The exercises in this exam are based on the reading of a passage. The latter represents in fact the core of the exam. Nearly all the activities in sections one, two and three are related to the topic of the passage. This is due to the fact that stress is put on Reading all through the third year. Pupils are taught how to read in order to proceed to writing in English.

Most of the learners at this level are between 16 and 19 years old. Many of them come from poor or unfavourable social environments. They do not actually read outside the classroom. In the classroom, they often become dependent on the teacher for their reading. The pupils who have not been initiated to read effectively in Arabic or in french lack the reading techniques and skills that are necessary for processing information from a text. As a result, when they read a text in English, their reading pace is very slow, as they want to understand every single word. This inevitably leads to their failure to grasp the writer's message in the text. Staiger (1973) points out in this respect:

“Many regressions are due more to the type of training received and individual reading habits than to the nature of the language”.

(Staiger 1973, p.13)

Since the learners have not experienced reading with pleasure earlier in Arabic or in French, they feel anxious, frustrated and even mentally stuck when it comes to a written text in English, be it in the classroom or during an exam. Reading is seen as a 'chore' or an irksome task as it requires from them concentration and energy. They often do not know why they must make such efforts. Their sense of creativeness and imagination remains dormant and they do not seem to have attained the meaning levels in Arabic or French, which are prior to reading English as a foreign language. While speaking is natural, reading and writing are more cultural. The pupils are unwilling readers because reading is not regarded as a pleasurable activity. Furthermore, reading in class usually entails answering a long list of comprehension questions, which requires memorising, regurgitating and reordering the answer with poor grammatical and vocabulary tools. This reluctance towards reading a passage stems from several causes and is often related to a lack in motivation be it instrumental, integrative or vocational.

The time factor is also a possible cause in failure to read. It is slightly different in volume from one stream to another. The planning and decision making of any teaching operation is made at the highest level (the Ministry of Education). The latter decides on what

languages to be taught, at what level, for what purposes and for how long these languages have to be taught. The tables below show the distribution of the teaching volume for English in our secondary schools nowadays.

TABLE 1

STREAMS	TIME ALLOTTED WEEKLY		
	1 AS	2 AS	3 AS
Literary streams			
Arabic language + literature	2 h + 1 h	3 h + 3 h + 4 h	3 h + 3 h + 4 h
Human Islamic sciences + foreign languages			
Scientific streams + Natural sciences	1 h + 1 h	3 h + 3 h + 3 h	3 h + 3 h + 3 h
Technology + Exact sciences			
Management streams + Economy Management		3 h	3 h

English for Academic Purpose Syllabuses (June 1995, p.4)

TABLE 2

TECHNICAL STREAMS	TIME ALLOTED WEEKLY	
	2.AS	3.AS
Building Engineering	2 hours	2 hours
Mechanics	2 hours	2 hours
Electronic	2 hours	2 hours
Electro-techniques	2 hours	2 hours
Chemistry	2 hours	2 hours

English for Occupational Purpose Syllabuses (May 1995, p.5)

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate how little the learners are exposed to the English language. Moreover, the official syllabi are too demanding and not congruent with the official textbook. As a matter of fact, the pedagogical instructions of May 1993 state that

“the syllabus has pre-eminence over the prescribed textbooks, or any other supporting material. The role of the textbooks is to present raw material that must be adapted by the teacher to cover the syllabus.” Syllabus for English (May 1993, p.19).

The syllabi for English (1995) stress on the importance of the reading skill needed for consulting written documents

as the case may be for literature, translation, science and technology. If we consider the main objectives of the English subject set up by the National Charter (1976) and those outlined under the English syllabi (1995), we see clearly that the reading skill has an important place in the teaching of English as a foreign language. It is the first skill pupils need to master to sit for the Baccalaureate Exam. It is also a skill they need after leaving school. Yet, when considering pupils' comprehension activities during a reading lesson or a test, we notice that many do not achieve understanding of the reading input. This is clearly observed in the first reading facility they have at hand: the course book.

The course book "Comet", for example, is based on a thematic approach, not a structural one. In the Teacher's Book (1988/1989), one can read:

"One of the authors' major concerns has been to sensitise secondary school pupils to the facts that communication operates at discourse level, not a sentence level."

Teacher's Book (1988,1989 p. 4)

The contents of the book are organised along thematic lines in order to make pupils aware of the importance of language. Both textbooks: Think it over and Comet present some raw material that needs to be selected and adapted by the teacher so as to cover the interests and

motivation of the learners. In Comet most texts include practice in the four skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However no structure practice is included and there are no exercises on the structures listed in the syllabus. The pupils have to listen to long passages including a large number of difficult words. These are often a source of difficulty in reading and felt as a tiresome task by the learner. The reading passages in the book consist mainly of authentic extracts. These texts are usually preceded by one or two activities, or nothing (e.g. pp. 52, 62). Some notes explaining the unfamiliar words follow the reading passages in some texts. The activities that follow the texts are generally directed at developing intensive reading. They include matching pairs, table completion, comprehension questions, sentence completion, gap filling, true and false statements and vocabulary activities.

An important activity for developing the reading skill is absent: it is that dealing with contextual reference (he, we, where, ...pro. forms). It only appears once in the textbook Comet (p.53). The text is 'woven' so as to make coherent paragraphs, thanks to reference elements and the conjunctions. Yet, these are often neglected or even ignored by the teacher. The crucial issue on anaphoric and cataphoric references which constitute a major reference problem for our learners is put aside either because of the teacher's unconsciousness of the problem (lack of in-service training) or simply his inability to

teach such reference markers (anaphora / cataphora) that seem to work differently in English and Arabic. The learner has to be aware of these reference markers in the text and their meaning in order to be able to interpret messages from texts. Comet rarely provides activities related to the development of the pupils' vocabulary, such as introducing words (known and new words), explaining roots and affixes, teaching word formation and compounds. No place is given (or suggested) in the book for pronunciation, stress, and intonation. The post-reading activities are reduced to only one activity. The pupils are usually required to give their opinion about the topic of the unit in pairs or in groups. Writing follows the post reading. The pupils are introduced to various activities such as writing a letter, filling gaps and ordering sentences. Finally, there is a song or a poem related to the topic, and a reading for leisure at the end of the unit, to provide extra reading material that might be exploited by the learners and teachers alike. There are no visual aids in the units of the book.

We shall briefly evaluate a unit (Unit 11) in Comet for illustration purposes.

A teaching unit is covered in three weeks (eight to ten hours per unit) since only two or three hours a week are allotted to English classes. The usual approach for the teacher is to set up the final objective(s).

*” By the end of these units the pupils should be able to
..... “ .*

The topic in “Unit 11” (pp.100 – 111) is: great challenges to mankind. The unit starts with a declaration of the United Nations Conference on the human environment: Stockholm (1972) (p.100, in Comet).

In the pre-listening phase, the warm up activities are not related to the listening comprehension, which is too long (28 lines). The pupils are unable to listen to long passages, which include difficult items. It is necessary to move from concrete to abstract. For example, ask the pupils to describe the pollution they face in their immediate environment (i.e., car engine exhausts, factory smoke...). The text on the Chernobyl accident, in the listening comprehension, could be used as a reading input. There are no visual aids but only questions and texts that are too long and difficult to understand. Even the writer’s style is not accessible to 3.A.S learners. Teachers can ask the pupils to skim through the text and give the main ideas of each paragraph. This can be followed by activity 6 (pp. 104-105). The table given in the unit (Table One, Comet, p105) may be simplified to:

TABLE 3

Causes	Consequences
- Engine exhausts	- Foul smells with fumes
- Chemical processes	- Noxious gases
- Industries	- Polluted waters

The pupils may be asked to reconstruct the text using the clues given in the table above. Also teach them discourse by asking what or who the underlined words in the text refer to. For example: “Of the many great problems which face the world today, pollution is one which may truly be called <man-made>. Although increasing technology may have brought to mankind many benefits, we are in danger of destroying all that makes life worth living” (from Comet § 1 p. 103).

Refers to

For example: Line 1 p. 103 one —————> problem
 Line 3 p. 103 we —————> writer + people

Activity 7 (b) (p.105) is very useful and enables the learner to evaluate the information and understand the implied message.

Nowadays the learner finds it hard to read in English and even in French or in Arabic. Language teaching methodologies have assigned different priorities to different skills according to the aspect of language being emphasised. The current tendency is more towards

the functional and communicative approaches. In this respect, and since the early eighties, our schools use the following textbooks:

New lines for first year learners.

Midlines for the second form (except the technical streams).

New skills for the second forms (technology).

Think it over was used for 3 A. S learners.

Modern world was used for 3 A. S learners technology.

Comet is used four 3A. S all the streams in our schools.

If we look at the main objectives behind the Syllabus, the National Charter and the Pedagogical Instructions, we come to the conclusion that the teaching of English as a foreign language in Algeria must concentrate more on the reading and writing skills. The immediate needs of the learners being to sit for the Baccalaureate Exam. The long-term needs may be university studies, the use of various reading materials, and more recently, the use and access to information from the Web.

The communicative view of language suggests that the learner expresses himself in the foreign language and understands oral and written material without too much stress on grammar. Wilkins (1976) says in this respect:

“What people want to do through language is more important than the mastery of language as an unapplied system.”

(Wilkins 1976: 42)

Thus, learning a language is perceived as a tool for communication. There is emphasis on communicative competence, i.e., being able to use the foreign language communicatively. According to D. Hymes (1972), 'communicative competence' is basically the ability to use language in real situation with a background strategy to negotiate meaning. Language acquisition is no more seen as a result of habit formation? Group work and individual creativity are encouraged. The importance of comprehension is emphasised and errors are seen as an inevitable by-product in the language learning process. Efficient reading is no more aloud but it is silent and individual. Contextualisation of all the teaching points becomes a must.

The new pedagogical objectives on the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the Algeria aim at getting the learners to have practice in all the four skills. Emphasis is on reading because of the learners short and long term needs. However, the time constraints (2 or 3 hours of English per week) make it hard to comply with these objectives. Furthermore, the official textbook Comet which is not a complete source of knowledge for 3 AS learners, is often used slavishly by the teachers and learners alike. As a result, the pupils are not equipped with the basic tools that allow them to take the Baccalaureate Exam with relative confidence. Many factors that affect foreign language learning such as the learners' attitude towards English and the teacher's

methods are to be looked at with more care. Other factors include inadequate knowledge of the English language structures, poor knowledge of the vocabulary and little exposure to English. Pupils may have better results in reading comprehension if they have more opportunities for learning and reading in English. Teachers can devise the reading tasks by forming groups in the classroom assigning each group one activity.

Finally, another factor that affects learning is the text structure itself. Pupils are often not familiar with the rhetorical modes of the language or the text lay out: they seem to skip important clues in the body of the text such as the title, the subtitles, the introduction and the conclusion. They don't seem to have developed any reading strategy that allows them to take the text as a whole and they often limit themselves to the word-by-word deciphering and understanding. The length of the text, and authentic material may also impede the learners' reading speed and comprehension.

Reading comprehension has to be taught in the light of new theories about the reading process. Knowledge of the reading difficulties, and a consideration of the possible causes, should lead the teacher to develop an attitude which helps the learner to develop his motivation for reading English inside as well as outside the classroom.

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