# MAIN PRINCIPLES FOR DEVELOPING READING SKILLS IN ESL/FL CLASSROOMS

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**ABSTRACT**
Reading is an essential skill for ESL/FL learners because it is a readily available way to expose to language learners' target language. The ability to read in a foreign language is needed as the learners have specific needs for information and pleasure, for their career and for study purposes. Good reading texts provide a number of educational objectives and can bring in interesting topics, stimulate discussion, debate and motivate imaginative responses and can be the springboard  for fascinating lessons.  This study provides a framework for a series of key principles for developing reading skills and explain how these principles can be applied in the ESL/FL classroom.
**Key words:  Reading skill and the principles for developing reading**

It is believed that reading is a highly effective process to gain information and widen knowledge. Reading plays even more  important roles in a second or foreign language than in the first language since it is a readily available way to expose to the second language learners' target language.  Many ESL/FL learners want to acquire the ability to read in a foreign language as they have specific needs for information and pleasure, for their career and for study purposes. Moreover, reading texts provide a number of educational objectives. Besides offering opportunities to learn language, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation and the way we construct sentences and paragraphs, texts also serve as good models for English writing. Good reading texts can bring in interesting topics, stimulate discussion, debate and motivate imaginative responses and can be the springboard for fascinating lessons.

According to Nuttal (2005, p.31), "Reading has general aims to enable students to enjoy (or at least feel comfortable with) reading in the foreign language, and to read without help unfamiliar authentic texts, at appropriate speed, silently and with adequate understanding". This implies that there are some aspects which influence students' proficiency in reading; this also indicates some implications about what should be done in the classroom. Based on the goals presented, this provides a framework for a series of useful principles which can develop reading skills among the students. This essay will discuss key principles for developing reading skills and explain how these principles can be applied in the ESL/FL classroom.

A number of studies have been done by Hood, Solomon and Burns (1996), Harmer (1998), and Brown (2001) to identify some principles in teaching reading. Related to their findings, the writer considers that there are five key principles for developing reading skills. They can be classified as follows:

## DETERMINE THE PROFILE OF THE LEARNERS

Firstly, it is very important for teachers to know the profile of their students, in terms of their cultural background, age, and level of competency in L2/FL reading because the differences among learners can affect learning processes and teaching procedures.  This principle is supported by Hedge (2000, p.16) who states that teachers need to keep a sense of their pupils

as individuals when making decisions about course content and methodology. According to Bernhardt (1991 cited in Urquhart and Weir 1998, p.7), second language readers are not a homogeneous group: there are some variables that influence their understanding in reading texts including culture, age, and language levels. In culture, for instance, readers of English as a second language from Western Europe are likely easy to share knowledge to English text than readers from other cultures. While it is true that reading may present new worlds and new culture to readers, teachers still need to select materials that deal with students' cultural  knowledge. There is also a difference between children and adult readers. It is believed that children are in a critical period when they can acquire language more easily. However, Davies (1995, pp 80-81) argues that although adult readers have limited linguistic knowledge of English, they have well-establish schemata for reading a wide range of texts. Since people of different ages have certain needs, competences, and cognitive skills, considering age is important for teachers. The most important thing is that teachers should know students' level of reading ability in English. Although it is clear that there is a progression of reading abilities for language students from a beginner level to an advanced level, teachers should take into account some other aspects to determine the level of students' proficiency (Hood, Solomon, and Burns, 1996, p.30). Sometimes it is found that students have difficulties in reading a short personal note which is regarded as a beginner level text, but they understand a technical manual in their workplace easily which is thought suitable for a much higher level. Therefore , by considering the characteristics of the learners, teachers can select appropriate approaches, suitable texts and activities for their students.

**DETERMINE CLEAR OBJECTIVES OF THE READING CLASSROOM**
The second principle, teachers should determine clear objectives of reading classroom. Reading is an activity with a purpose. It is important to know the reader's purpose because it will help students to understand the text and gain satisfactory results in reading. Students want to improve their reading skills for many different important reasons. Their goals may be related to their further education which is involved reading textbooks and lecture notes, or they want to improve their employments prospects, for enjoyment or for other practical purposes. The purposes for reading guide the teachers to select the right materials. This also determines the appropriate approach to reading comprehension. According to Hood, et al. (1996 p. 24) and Hedge (2000, p.205), there are a set of general learning objectives for reading as follows;

1. Readers need to be able to read  a range of texts in English and have a critical point of view to the content of the texts
2. Readers need to build schematic knowledge, understand the purposes and roles of the text as well as to process and comprehend its meaning.
3. Readers need to encourage their knowledge of language and develop their awareness how language works as a system, including the different linguistics features of spoken and written language.
4. Readers need to adapt reading style with a number of skills and strategies and apply them appropriately. These involve drawing on social and cultural knowledge, knowledge of the language of the text, and strategies for accessing meaning such as predicting, sampling, or skimming for the gist of the meaning.

Davies (1995, p. 132) adds  that there is a close relationship between reading purposes and text; reading for pleasure typically requires narrative or literary style, while reading for

learning is predominantly informative texts. Therefore, efficient reading requires clearly identifying the purpose in reading.

## RECOGNIZE THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Thirdly, teachers and students should recognize their roles in the classroom. Teachers are the most important elements in a reading class, they play essential roles since their attitude may influence students and their performance. Harmer (2001, p.213) explains that in order to encourage students to read enthusiastically in class, teachers have five main roles. As *organizers*, tell students exactly what their reading purpose is and give them clear instructions about how to achieve it: *observers*, observe students progress to know how well they are doing individually and cooperatively; *feedback organizers*, organize feedback sessions after reading to check that they have completed the task successfully in order to sustain students motivation; as *prompters*, prompt students to notice language features in the text, and as *controllers*, direct them to certain features of text construction, clarify in ambiguities, and making them aware of issues of text structure which they had not come across previously. Moreover, Nuttal (2005, p.32) mentions that teachers have responsibilities dealing with helping students to get pleasure from their reading, choosing suitable texts and tasks to practice, making sure that everyone works productively and apply their full potential to interpret the text themselves, and monitoring students progress according to their capacity. As good language teachers, they should prepare their students with a sense of what successful language learners do to achieve success in developing reading skills. Students are supposed to know their roles to attain the goals (Nuttal, 2005, p.33). It is expected that students take an active part in learning, so they need to understand how texts work and what do they do when they read. As Freebody and Luke (1990, cited in Hood, et al 1996, p.46) explain, readers may have roles as *code breakers* who decode the graphic representation of language on the page into recognized words; *text user* who understand the meaning of the text in order to carry out some task; and as *text analyst* who is concerned to read behind the text for implicit meaning and assumptions. Furthermore, students should monitor their own comprehension whether they understand a text. So both students and teachers have responsibilities in reading classrooms.

## USE DIFFERENT READING STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

Another principle is that teachers should use different reading strategies and techniques in the classroom. It is essential for the teachers to make use of various strategies and techniques in teaching reading so the students can adjust their reading style to deal with different situations and goals. Reading strategies can be described as " plans for solving problems encountered in constructing meaning" ( Duffy, 1993 cited in Janzen, 2002, p. 287). More competent readers apply a wide variety of strategies (Brown, 2001). When reading strategies are used by language learners, they can manage their reading experience, and they gain confidence in their ability to read the language.

According to Keatley and Kennedy (1998), there are some strategies which can help students read more quickly and effectively, they include previewing, predicting, skimming and scanning, guessing from context, and paraphrasing. Previewing before reading is one of strategies that can make a big difference in how well students understand what they read. The aims of previewing is to find out what students are going to read before actually reading.

In previewing strategy, teachers get learners to engage with the text by reviewing titles, section heading, and caption pictures. By using this strategy, students preview to get an idea of what they will find in the text, then they try to make connections, they become acquainted with what they want to learn so their comprehension will be faster and better. The second strategy is prediction; based on students' prior knowledge of the topic and the idea in the text, they can predict some vocabularies that they think will arise and what shorts of things they suppose the text will say. Related to prediction strategy, students can work out the meaning of unfamiliar words by guessing from context. This encourages students to keep on reading without over dependence on dictionary. The next strategy is skimming; high speed reading that can save the time and help the readers get through lots of material quickly for its gist. Skimming gives readers the benefits of being able to predict the purpose of the passage, the main topic, or message, and possibly some of the supporting ideas. Another strategy is scanning; very high-speed reading that readers do when they are looking for a specific piece of information in a text. Scanning exercises may ask students to look for names or dates, to find a definition of a key concept, or to list a certain number of supporting details. It has the objective to extract specific information without reading through the whole text. In other words both scanning and skimming are very effective ways to enable students to pick significant parts of texts. The last strategy is paraphrasing, in paraphrasing strategy, students check their comprehension by restating the information the information and ideas in the text. These strategies encourage students become strategic and independence learners.

In order to ensure the development of strategic reading skills, Keatley and Kennedy (1998) recommend that teachers are supposed to assist the students learn when and how to use reading strategies, in several ways:

1. Teachers should represent the strategies through the processes of previewing, predicting, skimming and scanning, and paraphrasing. They become models to show students how the strategies work and how much they can know about a text before they begin to read word by word.
2. Teachers allocate time in class for group and individual previewing and predicting activities as preparation for reading. Allowing time to these activities indicates their importance and value.
3. Teachers provide exercises to review vocabulary items. This helps students learn to guess meaning from context.
4. Teachers should encourage students to talk about what strategies they think will help them proceed reading tasks. This helps students develop flexibility in their choice of strategies.

In implementing these strategies, Brown( 2001, p. 314) suggests that teachers should include bottom up and top-down techniques. In line with this, Murcia and Olshtain (2000, p.119) consider that top-down and bottom-up processing happen simultaneously. This means students need to draw on their intelligence and experience based on their schemata to understand the text and get a general view of reading through top-down processing. At the same time, they use bottom-up processing to build up a meaning and decode the written text by recognizing letters and words, working out sentence structure. Students bring their prior knowledge and experience to the reading process and all at once interact effectively with the text by using their linguistics knowledge and individual reading strategies. Students may adopt top down approach to predict the probable meaning and use the bottom up approach to

check whether that it is really what the writer says ( Nuttal, 2005, p.17). The combination of top-down and bottom-up techniques leads to good and effective reading. Brown also suggests that teachers are supposed to use techniques that are intrinsically motivating (2001, p.313). Students may be asked to create their own material for reading and are given choice in selecting reading material. Interesting materials based on students' point of view will motivate students to adapt reading activities and help them to be independent and effective readers. In addition, Brown says that it is necessary to subdivide the techniques into pre-reading, during reading, after reading phases (2001, p.315). This means in pre-reading teachers should introduce a topic, encourage skimming, scanning, predicting and activate students' schemata. Students can bring the best of their knowledge and skills to the text when they have given a chance to 'ease into' the passage. Students should be given a sense of purpose for reading by taking note while they read. In post reading, students can do comprehension questions, vocabulary study, identify the author's purpose, or examine grammatical structures.

In addition, Nunan (2003) provides some useful techniques in teaching reading. The first technique is *an anticipation guide*, it is used to activate students' prior knowledge by learning what they already know about the topic of the reading. This activity is important to engage the readers in an activity that gets them thinking about the topic. Teachers can ask five questions about the content of the reading passage based on the reading skill they want to develop. For example, when teachers want to focus on developing students' ability in making inferences, they prepare five inference questions. The second technique is *word webs*, it is a good activity to cultivate students' vocabulary skills. Teachers start this technique by writing a key concept in the middle of whiteboard. Then, students may work individually or in a small groups in building from the center of the word web by adding other vocabulary which is related to the key word. The third technique is *making inferences while reading*. Instead of asking the students comprehension questions after reading a passage, a teacher can model with the class how comprehension is reached. Teachers teach for comprehension by asking the class reads together and discusses how they are understanding what is written. The class works together at making inferences while reading. The next technique is *repeated reading*, this activity helps students to increase their reading rate. Students are required to read a short passage over and over again until they achieve criterion levels of reading rate and comprehension. The next technique is *verify reading strategies*. Teachers ask students to identify the strategies that they use while reading. Students can work together to response the questions and share with each other a wide range of strategies available for comprehending reading material. The last technique is *reading journal* to evaluate reading progress. Students make a journal entry each day. They respond to different questions based on different areas of focus they are working on in class. This activity helps students to see the progress they are making in class.

Those are some strategies and techniques that can be applied by the teachers in teaching reading. Using various strategies and techniques in teaching reading in the classroom will be beneficial for the students, so they can adjust their reading style to deal with different situations and goals.

## USE AUTHENTIC AND VARIETY MATERIALS

Finally, teachers should use authentic and variety materials. In selecting materials, teachers should take into account some aspects related to their students. Nuttal (2005) offers three criteria for choosing reading text for students: (1) suitability of content: material that students will find interesting, enjoyable, challenging, and appropriate for the goals of learning; (2) exploitability: a text that facilitates the achievement of certain language and content goals and integrated with other skills; (3). Readability; a text with lexical and structural difficulty that will challenge students without overwhelming them. Many teachers like to use authentic texts, texts written for use by the foreign language community, not for language learners. These texts are used not only because they may be motivating but also because they have characteristics of true discourse, being coherent and clearly organized. However, the use of authentic materials is still debatable because linguistically difficult texts are unlikely to be suitable for developing most reading skills, especially if they result in the use of translation, or any kind of substantial intervention from the teacher. If the text seems too difficult, teachers can exploit it by means of tasks which do not demand detailed understanding but make more use of top-down strategies. According to Ur Penny (1996, p.150), teachers may use simplified texts for less proficient learners in order to make them appropriate to student level. Authentic material is ideal since teachers want their students to be able to cope with the same kind of reading that encountered by native speakers of target language, but if we cannot find enough at the right level, we can simplify or specially rewrite it. However good simplification is, a something is always lost, that is why some teachers refuse to use simplified versions. A wide variety of authentic (near authentic) materials is also needed to stimulate some activities in the classroom. Students who are exposed to all the kinds of texts will be motivated to learn language.

To summarize, it is clear that by recognizing the profiles of the learners, the roles of teachers and students, having clear objectives and purposes, using authentic and variety material with various strategies and approaches, teachers can facilitate the students to improve their reading skills. Based on my experience, those principles are very essential for developing reading skills. In Indonesian schools, the objectives of the EFL reading classroom have been determined by the curriculum to expand student knowledge and prepare them for higher level of education. Hence the topics and the materials have been established. However, It is often found that the students who are generally from the same culture and in the same age, have different level of reading in the classroom. Considering the fact, the teachers have to be careful in selecting appropriate methods and different strategies deal with students reading ability and style. Moreover, the teachers should choose suitable materials and activities for their students. Therefore, the implications of these principles will influence student proficiency in reading.

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