

Reading for meaning

Many EAL learners are highly literate in one or more languages, but some may not have had the opportunity to learn to read in the language of their home. In some cultures reading is seen as a specialist skill, not one that every individual can and should acquire. In others it is the skill of decoding is particularly admired, and understanding what you are reading is seen as less important. It is therefore very useful for teachers to inform themselves about each learner's educational background.

Reading involves both decoding and reading for meaning. Learners who can read in a language that uses the same alphabet as English will find it easier to learn to decode in English than will those who can read another script, but both groups bring with them an understanding that print carries meaning. Younger EAL learners will have opportunities to learn to decode along with their monolingual peers, but older learners may need help with decoding, and their teachers may not have experience in helping them with this. Teaching reading to older EAL learners who are not literate in their first language is a specialist role, and one which we hope to develop in the future. This Great Ideas page focuses on reading for meaning.

Decoding should not be an end in itself, and practising reading 'nonsense words' such as *vap* or *ulf* is unhelpful because EAL learners cannot be expected to know whether or not these words have meaning in English. All reading should be meaningful, and should be supported by visual inputs (pictures, diagrams, mime etc.) as much as possible.

Types of reading activities

In schools, reading tends to be seen as an individual activity, and the older the learners, the more likely this is to be the case, but there are other possibilities. Reading as a collaborative activity is very beneficial to EAL learners. This can be done in a number of ways:

- ◆ Read aloud to learners. Recent research has shown that being read to for as little as ten minutes a day can make a significant difference to a learner's reading ability.
- ◆ Read in pairs in class
- ◆ Paired reading with an older learner

- ◆ Read aloud in small groups
- ◆ Read in small groups while listening to an audiobook

Practical ideas for reading

Top tip: The more learners know about what a piece of text says, the easier it is to read it

? To consider: Is the text age appropriate and engaging for the learner?

Working with text may involve reading at word level, at phrase or sentence level, or at paragraph or longer text level. For reading at word level, use flashcards and vocabulary reference sheets with visual support. For reading at phrase / sentence level:

- ◆ read flashcards of whole sentences
- ◆ cut up flashcards of whole sentences and ask learners working in pairs, in groups or as a class to reassemble them
- ◆ working in pairs or groups, put sentence flashcards in order to build up a paragraph

For reading at paragraph or longer text level:

- ◆ Try 'reading in turns': learners take turns to read up to a full stop, which gives an immediate chance to check understanding
- ◆ Give learners a clear idea of what to expect from the text, and give them plenty of time to engage with it. Consider providing a brief summary, in pictures or in straightforward English.
- ◆ Talk about what is being read. Pinpoint specific elements in the text through discussion. EAL learners need practice in reading between and behind the lines: they need to see that text may imply more than it actually says.
- ◆ Prepare for reading: check text in advance, to work out which vocabulary items and structures may be challenging, not only for EAL learners but for others. Consider pre-teaching these.
- ◆ Be aware of familiar vocabulary used in ways which may obscure meaning. What's a '*piggy bank*'? What happened when the King '*gave someone his daughter's hand in marriage*'? Also, be aware that texts

designed for less able monolingual readers may pose substantial difficulties for EAL learners. The increased use of prepositional verbs and colloquial expressions ('*Oh, I give up!*') can make these texts easy to decode but difficult to understand.

- ◆ Use DARTs. DARTs are activities which lead learners to interact with texts in ways which enhance understanding. For example, learners can work in pairs to highlight information in a text, after the activity has been modelled by the teacher. As a follow-up, learners can use a graphic organiser to categorise information or to summarise the information they have found. [Read more about DARTs here \[insert link\]](#)
- ◆ Provide and encourage EAL learners to use glossaries, word lists, translation software and bilingual dictionaries. [Read more about bilingual dictionaries and translation software here \[insert link\]](#)
- ◆ Provide dual-language books – both fiction and non-fiction – for EAL learners who are literate in their first language. EAL learners can also be encouraged to make dual-language books for younger learners or for their peers.
- ◆ Make available high-quality texts (picture books / short novels / poetry / manga / illustrated non-fiction) that will encourage EAL learners to read for pleasure

Answering questions, whether orally or in writing, is the traditional way of checking comprehension. However some learners become skilled in answering the question without fully understanding the text. It is often more effective to ask EAL learners to demonstrate their understanding in other ways, for example:

- ◆ Ask learners to say whether discrete sentences (taken from the text, or paraphrases) are true or false
- ◆ Give learners a number of false sentences, and ask them to reword the sentences to make them true
- ◆ Give learners a copy of the text which has been edited to contain errors. Ask the learners to identify the errors and correct them

All of the above can be done as collaborative activities, in pairs or groups, as well as by learners working individually.

Good for EAL, Good for All: Can I use these ideas and activities with the whole class?

Yes, definitely! All of the activities and ideas outlined above have been extensively tried and tested in multilingual classrooms. They offer support for all learners, while helping EAL learners in particular to engage with the mainstream curriculum.

