3.3 CALL and developing reading

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Introduction

Approaches to reading as a process and in the same way approaches to teaching reading in a foreign language classroom have changed over the last decades from that of seeing reading as a passive process of receiving information to understanding reading as an active and even interactive process (e.g. Grabe, 1988).

There are several definitions of what reading is, but in general it is defined as a receptive language process. Brumfit (1982, p.3) states that “reading is an extremely complex activity involving a combination of perceptual, linguistic and cognitive abilities.” Hedge (2000, p. 189) identifies what the reader needs in order to make sense of the text:

- syntactic knowledge,
- morphological knowledge.

These two types of knowledge basically focus on the language itself and help the learners to decode the language of the text and are usually addressed as systemic or linguistic knowledge. However, the reader needs more in order to interpret the meaning of the text. There are other types of knowledge such as:

- general world knowledge,
- socio-cultural knowledge,
- topic knowledge,
- genre knowledge.

These types of knowledge are called in general schematic knowledge (term coined by Cook) which refers to the process where the text being read activates the prior knowledge and life experience of the learner. The experienced reader who has reached a certain level of automaticity uses these processes as one functioning complex. In this context Hedge (ibid.) explains the interaction as an “interplay among various kinds of knowledge that a reader employs in moving through a text.”

In agreement with this view Grabe (1988) defines a skilled reader as someone who is able to succeed in:

- reading as a comprehending process – not just in decoding letters and words but in gaining the meaning from whatever it is
- reading as a rapid process – covering the material quickly enough so that the information that we read five sentences ago we still remember and can relate it to the
material we are reading now (if we read too slowly we would not be able to develop an overall understanding of the text),

- reading as the complex of sub-processes – i.e. to recognize the words very rapidly, we have to have some sense about syntactic structure, we have to use our knowledge, background knowledge.

People nowadays in general encounter a great variety of written language day to day – whether in printed or electronic form. A different reason for reading determines also the way we read. We can read in order to receive some information (reading for survival, reading for learning, etc.) or we can read for pleasure.

Never before it seemed easier and quicker to reach the information we need. While in the past we would have to first identify the source where the information we are looking for might be located (e.g. in a dictionary, textbook, fiction, encyclopaedia, etc.), today it is enough to enter the right key words into web browser and we will see loads of results where the needed information might be placed.

The availability of electronic devices in this sense made surveying a variety of web sites and searching for information rather easy and accessible; however, this requires the ability to read the text quickly and either find what we need or to get the main idea of the text. The reader thus uses techniques which are called:

- **skimming** – where the aim is to discover the main idea, to get the gist of it, the eye runs quickly, without pausing to study the details.
- **scanning** – where the aim is to find a particular piece of information, fairly fast reading with instant rejection of all irrelevant data.

These two techniques of quick reading are important especially when handling the text in a CALL classroom since learners face much higher amount of texts in an electronic device than in a printed textbook. There are, however, other techniques which the reader needs to use in order to succeed in the reading process. These are:

- **anticipation and prediction** – when readers predict what the text is going to be about they immediately activate their prior knowledge and experience; prediction also stirs curiosity and learners will be interested in checking whether their predictions were right or wrong;
- **contextual guessing** – where the reader makes the sense and understandable connections based on the indications provided by the passage;
- **making inferences** – when the reader uses clues from the text to figure out what the author doesn’t express explicitly – this is sometimes referred to as reading “between the lines”;
- **using key words** – which can help the reader discover the so called internal structure of the text. The properly chosen key words and the ability of the reader to discover them in the text can guide the reader in making the sense of the text structure.
The above mentioned techniques should equip the learner of a foreign language not only with the ability to read and the texts. In general we can say that the teacher has the following aims while teaching reading (Hedge, 2000, p. 205):

1. to enable the learner to read a range of texts in English;
2. to adapt reading style according to the range of purposes and apply different strategies as appropriate;
3. to build a knowledge of language (e.g. vocabulary, structure), which will facilitate development of greater reading ability;
4. to build schematic knowledge in order to interpret texts meaningfully;
5. to develop awareness of the structure of written texts in English and to be able to make use of, e.g., rhetorical structure, discourse features, and cohesive devices in comprehending texts;
6. to take a critical stance to the content of texts.

Teaching reading skills in CALL

As the use of modern technology influenced educational context in every single aspect teaching reading has not been left out. The immense world of Internet sources available to learners who would a few decades ago see an English text only in a textbook, opened a completely new dimension in the foreign language instruction. It enabled to raise the motivation of learners, their engagement, interactivity as well as the exposure to the target language. The last mentioned aspect seems to be crucial especially in the context where the target language was not easily accessible in its authentic form. Textbook texts are in general adapted to the appropriate level so that the learners face only a desirable level of difficulty. Open Internet sources, on the other hand, confront the learner with a wide variety of genres or text types, whether authentic or non-authentic, formal or informal.

However, as Palfrey and Gasser (2008, p. 246) underline the “use of technology in teaching makes no sense if it’s just because we think technology is cool. It’s easy to understand how we get to this place. The thinking goes like this: It’s fun and cool to blog; lots of people are doing it; we know that kids get some information from blogs; therefore, blogging must have a place in our school. This is a mistake. We should figure out, instead, how the use of technology can support our pedagogical goals.” In reading, thus, we must be very clear on why we implement technology in our teaching and what benefits it brings in comparison with a traditional textbook or other printed material based lesson.

However, using technology in developing reading skills of the learners requires modification of reading strategies used by the reader in comparison with a traditional reading process based on the printed material. As Huang (in Loucky, 2010, p. 235) suggests there are certain major areas which influence the use of reading strategies in CALL and he specifies them as:

- learner’s background knowledge and major areas of interest and need,
- degree of language proficiency,
• learner’s degree of computer skill/literacy,
• text topic and difficulty level.

Especially the last two mentioned areas differ from what the teacher would consider in the past. The level of the learners’ computer skills can have a strong influence on their task achievement. In the same way the question of text difficulty or appropriacy will be considered more often in a CALL classroom than in a traditional classroom since the sources at any proficiency or authenticity level are open to the learners at any time. This can be viewed as an advantage on one side because the intensity of exposure to the target language is incomparable in a CALL classroom. At the same time we need to be aware that both systemic and schematic knowledge are challenged much more while using open sources and the Krashen’s term comprehensible input (1982) has a huge relevance in this situation. Learners can become discouraged by the incomprehensibility of the text, especially when facing authentic texts. There are also questions of language appropriacy which students should be confronted with at their level of proficiency. It, therefore, is a crucial task of teachers to be absolutely clear on the reasons why they use these sources and how they select the texts as well as how they design the tasks for their learners.

Potential problematic aspects of teaching in a CALL classroom have already mentioned in chapter 1. There have been many attempts by various researchers to identify these limitations in order to help teachers to either avoid them or to be prepared to use alternative approaches. Ban et al. (2006) highlight especially the following areas:
• technical difficulties,
• logistic constraints,
• cognitive demands,
• affective stress.

They further state (ibid., p. 3) that “without moderation or facilitation of some kind, computer-mediated communication could be meaningless for learning.” What we find especially interesting in their arguments is that besides of possible feeling of cognitive overload - which Ban et al (ibid) claim may be experienced by learners if they are not navigated properly throughout the task or if the structure of hypermedia “supports multilinear, rather than sequentially or spatially arranged texts”(ibid.) – learners can also experience the feeling of “aloneness”. This can be caused by the tasks which on one side develop autonomous learning, but on the other side students are not prepared well for such tasks or the support they have been provided with is not sufficient.

These aspects must be considered by teachers when designing tasks for development of reading in a CALL classroom.
Tasks for developing reading in a CALL classroom

Whether we speak about developing reading skills in a traditional setting, i.e. textbook-based instruction, or a CALL classroom where technology plays the dominant role, it has to be underlined that the same teaching principles need to be applied for both processes. Reading-focused activities should follow the framework in which we:

1. help learners to orientate in the topic before reading, activate what they already know about it, help them to be prepared on both systemic (vocabulary, grammar) as well as schematic knowledge (general knowledge, experience): **PRE-READING PHASE**.

2. help them to get through the text by breaking the passage into smaller parts or we offer them an outline for recording of what is happening in the text, which can be used later, we help them to keep focused: **WHILE-READING PHASE**.

3. show the relevance of the text read by using it for other skills development or help them to make sense of the text by providing them by comprehension-check activities: **POST-READING PHASE**.

This framework can be applied in both traditional or CALL classrooms but planning of work and the instructions for teaching will differ. While the teacher working with a textbook in the classroom setting will be there for the students during all three phases and will guide the class in what they are supposed to do, in a CALL classroom the teacher will need to prepare each step in such a way that students will receive the main instructions and guidelines individually from the technological device. Of course, the teacher might – especially in the early stages of using the CALL approach – ask students to carry out only a single task and wait until they have finished, then take them to the next level. This, however, might cause the chaos in the class since some students with good computers skills might be ready early and be impatient to go further while the other might need more time to handle the technological device. To prevent the off-putting effects it would be more practical to prepare the entire path for the students so that they can move to the next levels without teacher’s permission and instruction. This kind of approach will prepare students for independent work on the task whether on their own or with their peers.

Model activities

**Activity 1: Calendars around the world** *(based on Lewis, p.58)*

**Objectives:** Students will learn about cultural differences concerning calendars; students will practise reading strategies – searching for information and getting the main idea of shorts texts

**Level:** A2+

**Reading focus:** predicting, skimming, scanning

**Other skills:** speaking – reporting the information found in a comprehensible way to the class; writing – taking notes

**Materials:** a worksheet for taking notes
Procedure:
1. Students revise calendar information (days, numbers, etc.).
2. Teacher asks whether children know about other calendars in the world and introduces the idea of other calendars in the past.
3. Students are divided into groups and are given a worksheet which they are to fill in with appropriate information for Julian calendar, Islamic calendar, Mayan calendar or Chinese calendar. Students predict possible differences.
4. Students search recommended site/s where they can find the information. After that they prepare their presentation and report to the class their findings.

Activity 2: Class trip
Objectives: Students will learn about new countries as possible places for their class trip; students will practise quick reading strategies; Students will learn how to cooperate with other on preparation of group outcome
Level: B1+
Reading focus: scanning, skimming, key words
Other skills: speaking – presenting the proposals, asking questions; writing – writing summaries; listening – to presentation
Materials: web sites with holiday and travelling information e.g. http://www.lonelyplanet.com/

Procedure:
1. Students brainstorm their class trip preferences
2. The teacher helps them to categorise the preferences so that students can be divided into groups.
3. Students choose what type of class trip they will plan.
4. The teacher and students agree on the most important information they need to find out a plan for.
5. Students search web sites e.g. http://www.lonelyplanet.com/
6. Students prepare an outline for the presentation of their proposal within the agreed framework. They present their proposal and answer the questions of their classmates about the trip.
7. Students choose the most attractive proposal.

Tasks
1. Discussions and reflections
With a partner discuss whether you agree or disagree with the following statement, give your reasons and explain what it means for the teacher’s work:
a) Today’s students live in a world bombarded by multimedia messages that can facilitate their maneuvering through everyday life. Most students are naturally attracted to, and motivated by, activities that involve technology, especially in educational arenas. However, technology in and of itself does not promote active learning, nor does technology use that is structured to mirror the teacher-fronted approach to language teaching/learning. (Ban et al)
b) Although reading and writing are widely acknowledged as important skills, students tend to do relatively little genuine reading and writing (as opposed to reading and writing ‘practice’) before their advanced-level coursebooks. (Kern, 2003)
c) ...one of the fundamental conditions of a successful extensive reading programme is that students should be reading material which they can understand. If they are struggling to understand every word, they can hardly be reading for pleasure – the main goal of this activity. (Harmer, 2001)

2. Planning a reading lesson

Find a text on A2 level from the web sites above in Useful sources. Design a lesson plan based on this text for:

a) a traditional class – no technology devices
b) a CALL classroom

Compare the differences and express pros and cons of both plans.

3. Reviewing of a textbook

Review one unit from the textbook that is used at secondary or primary schools. Then identify possible areas where a CALL approach could enrich a traditional textbook. Focus on the development of reading skills.

References


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**Useful sources**

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