An Approach to Teaching the Reading Skill for Academic Study

Anna Buick

It is held here that a university pre-sessional study skills course must strongly reflect the immensity of the academic year if it is to be effective, especially in the closing phase of a skills training course. While students are so diverse in their academic interests, levels of expertise in their field and competences as language users, it might seem that any attempt to ensure effective skills training for all is doomed to failure at the outset. This paper, however, suggests a way in which the difficulty might be overcome in the teaching of the reading skill. The following pages detail certain specifications that underpin the approach and discuss the principles on which the Reading course is based. The approach in operation is then described in the context of two groups of Reading students belonging to the 1985 September cohort of the University of Warwick Pre-sessional Study Skills Programme. The study concludes with an evaluation of the approach, and puts forward some considerations for any repeated implementation of the course.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Warwick Pre-Sessional programme provides three four-week phases (July, August and September) to develop the study skills of overseas students who intend to pursue university studies in various disciplines. Student numbers rise in September, when students join the course to ‘brush up’ their English and put study skills into practice in a British context.

At this final stage, any lack of contextualized skills-practice leaves some students, however, still unable to make the connection between the skills training and their real study needs in their respective specialisms, and so unable to apply the skills they were expecting to acquire. And it is perhaps least obvious in the reading skill just how training can effectively provide for individual needs. The difficulty for reading tutors and programme developers lies in identifying appropriate texts of interest to students with different disciplinary interests and degrees of expertise in their field, and in providing a meaningful reading brief that accommodates students of varying reading competence. This paper suggests a way in which the dilemma can be resolved.

The approach, detailed later here, is based essentially on four specifications:

1. Each student studies a text of substantial length, strictly on a topic pertaining to own area of specialism.
2. Reading-practice activity images the actual academic contexts of students.

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3. Classes are learner-centred, students largely working autonomously of each other while identifying their own interests and making manifest their respective needs.

4. Students are evaluated through an end-of-course task – an oral presentation – which is the product of preceding reading activity, and serves to assess reading competence and ability to apply extrapolated information in the context of the identified topic.

A PRINCIPLE-BASED APPROACH

For a long time now, writers have stressed the importance of exposing learners in the reading skill to authentic text that pertains to individual interests. Davis (1990), Sharp (1990) and Potts (1985), among many more, emphasize the need for just such provision. The inappropriacy of the subject matter of texts is one of the commonest criticisms of outgoing pre-sessional study-skills students who are not, in the main, motivated to interact with writers whose subjects are removed from the students’ own interests.

Aware of the reading bulk that lies ahead, students commonly express concern too, that they have not read enough on their pre-sessional course. Reading skill materials often consist of chunks of text – a page or two at best – which provide insufficient opportunity for students to really put their selective reading skills to the test. Exposure to longer texts allows students to deepen their interaction with the writer; it facilitates ample practice in note-making, and provides for familiarisation with the lexis and the sort of syntactic and informational content that typifies texts to which individuals are exposed in their respective academic contexts. The same view is held by Carrell and Eisterhold (1988:86), who point out that “repetitions of vocabulary and structure mean that review is built into the reading”. They echo Krashen’s call for ‘narrow reading’, that is, reading on a single topic or reading the work of a single author (Krashen 1981). They also remark on the common tendency of reading teachers to provide “short and varied selections”, suggesting that, conversely, longer texts enable a reader “to adjust to an author’s style, to become familiar with the specialized vocabulary of the topic, . . . (and) develop enough context to facilitate comprehension”.

Writers have also commonly stressed the need for real-world tasks to be presented in reading classes, tasks that have been identified as those which learners are expected to carry out in their future academic or occupational contexts. In our case, reading activity results in doing something else academic – giving an oral presentation. As Chase and Hynd (1987:533) point out, reading often involves “the social act of communication as well as individual reflection”. The classroom – the setting for the oral presentation – is the almost perfect “communication generating environment” (Potts op. cit: 26) for practising academic study skills, since it is, in fact, a classroom or seminar room in which such a real-world event takes place.

Davis’ claim that “the transfer of reading skills to real situations is not easily accomplished” is largely dismissed here given the presence of: a clearly identifiable common aim; a study setting which mirrors that in which skills are ultimately required; and a teaching methodology which is woven around individual needs.

Writers have repeatedly called for learner-centred reading classes in which learners make decisions that, traditionally, teachers have made for them. Jacobowitz (1990:620) also recognizes the importance of learner independence, calling for “teachable strategies . . . that will help college students read their textbooks effectively and independently, with full engagement of their own thinking and knowledge”. Relevantly, Jacobowitz echoes Rumelhart (1980:621) who claims on the basis of research findings that in order for learning to take place “new information must be integrated with what the learner already knows”. Waters and Waters (1992:265) claim that a successful student is not necessarily the student who implements recognized study techniques, but rather one who is “mature, balanced, . . . possessing an open, questioning mind, and willing to adopt an active, independent approach to study”. Our students are regarded in this light in the first instance.

In our approach, students are provided with the sort of learning environment and the sort of assignment that facilitate the addressing of individual needs. The proposal here allows for the monitoring of each learner’s reading competence in a process of continuous assessment, a practice advocated by both Sharp and Potts (op cit.). Corrective measures are implemented as respective weaknesses emerge, and there is a conscious regard for each individual’s language base, actual competence as a reader, and knowledge and experience in the specialism.

Lastly, there is an insistence on the final evaluation of each learner’s competence, to determine whether or not the needs of the language users have been accommodated in the reading skill. As a result, a tutor can refer any marked incompetence to in-sessional remedial action that addresses language and study skill needs for overseas students while they are simultaneously studying in their fields of specialization. Alderson and Urquhart (1988), while questioning the use of general texts in the testing of EAP students, provide data which suggests that “certain groups of students may be disadvantaged by being tested on areas outside their academic field” (182). It is appreciated that the evidence was based on the results of tests of a very different kind to the type of assessment proposed here. Nonetheless, their findings would seem to indicate that indeed any type of evaluation would be adversely affected by a mismatch between the nature of the task, materials content and field of interest.
THE STUDENTS
The two reading groups studied here were made up of 11 (group 1) and 12 students (group 2). Although at this institution students are, for the reading component, now broadly grouped according to subject interest rather than language ability, there was nevertheless, on this occasion, a mix of subject interest occurring in these two groups. Figure 1 shows the areas of subject interest for the two groups studied, with the numbers of students studying each area, and academic levels at which students would be studying.

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* T Selects text samples, based on subject interests of SS.

* In first reading class, T outlines procedure for study, and explains requirements for final oral presentations, which are based on the content of selected texts. T projects titles of texts on OHP for possible S-selection, then presents SS with texts for sampling.

* T reads texts, familiar enough with them to determine how well SS are able to
  * identify salient and relevant information;
  * paraphrase
  * make notes
  * correctly interpret the writer
  * coherently structure extracted information in relation to presentation topic.

* T provides one-to-one support for any 'lacks' or queries manifested during the process of reading and extrapolating relevant information.

* During the last 2 sessions, T takes notes during each 10-minute presentation, recording in particular, evidence of competence in the areas listed in figure 4.

  T provides 5-minute feedback immediately after each presentation on competence in those areas, initiating with one or two questions probing for understanding of any deep meaning that texts contain, and probing ability to apply information to a specific line of enquiry.

SS sample texts suggested by T, or depart to library to select own texts. While studying their texts, SS identify an area of discussion to which texts lend themselves (if they have not already identified the topic prior to selecting the text) and subsequently extract related information. SS screen, sort, and organize notes, and prepare OHP cells.

Each S uses notes, aided by OHP visuals where appropriate, to give a 10-minute oral presentation on a topic covered in the text, and answers questions posed by T, and receives feedback.

Figure 1: The range and levels of academic interest of 2 groups. Figures in parentheses indicate numbers of students studying each specialization, at each level.

PROCEDURE
Figure 2 below details the procedure followed by the tutor and students, in fulfilment of the requirements of the reading component briefing. Eight 1½-hour sessions are allocated to the study of the reading skill, the last two sessions of which are given over to presentation and assessment activity.
THE APPROACH IN OPERATION

Students had an overall preference for choosing their own texts rather than those from the tutor's reserve selection because most had already developed or proposed to develop an interest in a specific area of their subject. In fact, only 5 of the 23 students chose a text from those provided by the tutor.

As seen in figure 1, neither group was wholly made up of students with matching subject interests, but supportive communication between the sub-groups was not so vibrant as that observed between members of related areas of study.

By the end of the second session, all students had found a text they wanted to read, and had identified a topic on which to base their oral presentations. The chosen topics are listed in figure 3 below.

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<th>GROUP 1</th>
<th>GROUP 2</th>
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<td>Computer recreations</td>
<td>Differences between language learners</td>
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<td>Artificial intelligence engineering</td>
<td>Japanese university entrance exams</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transducers</td>
<td>How English evolved as an international language</td>
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<td>Alloy design</td>
<td>Foreign direct investment trends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deceit in the workplace</td>
<td>The power of multinational firms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Production planning (x2)</td>
<td>Intellectual property rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff development in business growth</td>
<td>Contract &amp; the crown</td>
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<tr>
<td>The role of the manager in international business (x2)</td>
<td>Women's experience of violence &amp; protection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corporate spying</td>
<td>Police records &amp; non-interrogation evidence</td>
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Figure 3: Topics studied by students from 2 Reading groups

In the main, the texts that students chose were thought to be of an appropriate length. However, guidance was required in several instances where students had selected a chunk of text that contained too great a coverage of the focus of interest. Students either discarded any obviously unnecessary text, or modified the topic to be investigated while retaining all of the text and having to read more selectively for relevant information.

The central role of the tutor was that of monitor, while responding to any observed need for comment and guidance. The tutor was required to quickly read selected texts within the first week of the course; this was to determine, in particular, how relevant and salient extracted information was, relative to the presentation topic and the time limit that would be enforced in the final presentation task.

The areas that most commonly emerged for remedial consideration are detailed below.

- Lexical and contextual meaning. (Difficulty in understanding words and ideas.)
- The identification of salient information. (The relevance of information to the chosen topic.)
- Marking the text. (Controlled underlining; systematized use of colours, symbols and numbers etc.; making a distinction between notes on unfamiliar vocabulary and notes on informational content.)
- Note-making technique, in the transferring of information from the text elsewhere - in the margin; on a page apart. ('Shorthand paraphrasing' and 'shorthand summarizing'.)
- The organization of extracted information. (The efficiency with which a student draws on the 'notes-bank' in the development of final notes; the extent to which notes provide for the remodelling of information, and lay the foundation for a structured, coherent, and original presentation.)

Figure 4: Check-list for monitoring reading and related skills activity

THE PRESENTATION PHASE

All students kept within the 10-minute presentation time limit, with the exception of one student who exceeded the limit unreasonably and had to be cut short, and another whose presentation fell short of the 10 minutes.

The questions the tutor asked, prior to providing feedback, were of the type that might feasibly be posed at a conference or in a seminar.
Ability to paraphrase and summarize was easily determined. One student, however, had lifted considerable information from the text as it was written, but was nonetheless able to answer the tutor's probing questions. Students, with varying degrees of competence in speaking English, demonstrated that they were effectively able to apply information from the text to the line of enquiry.

The tutor was able to assess the effectiveness of notes by observing whether presenters were able to direct themselves to the audience without over-reliance on their notes. Any weakness in notes was manifested in flustered apologetic pauses during the presentations while students tried to fathom long-hand 'notes' or find misplaced information. There were only two distracting breakdowns of this nature.

All students made use of the OHP. The extraction of information from the text relevant to the topic was determinable from the informational content of transparencies. Competence in note-making technique was further evidenced by the information displayed on transparencies—the use of symbols, numbers, colours, spacing, indentation, underlining, choice of upper/lower case lettering, abbreviation, and the omission of unnecessary words.

Observations concerning any distracting or recurring grammatical or lexical errors were made too, and eagerly received.

The audience learned from another's feedback as head-nodding indicated, nodding becoming more pronounced with recurring observations. Feedback was seen to be candid, helpful, and thorough, for the most, it was encouraging.

On completing the course, two students were advised of on-course remedial facilities which the institution offers. The tutor was also able to advise personal tutors who elaborated students' final reports of incidences of really poor reading that would badly affect a student's future study performance. There was only one such case.

**EVALUATION OF THE APPROACH**

The low number of students that chose a text supplied by the tutor was a good indication that pre-sessional students enjoy and can cope with an autonomy that actually allows them to contextualize their language development activity. Indeed, the principal criterion that students used for selecting a particular topic and text rested on whether or not an investigation of the same would contribute to their preparedness for future studies.

Working with such extreme independence of the tutor, students spent much more time actually engaged in valuable reading practice, in contrast to the tendency in traditional reading classes in which not only may texts be both short and unsuitable, but where talking is complementary to the methodology employed. Even the shortest text—a very dense legal text on a complex issue—was still vastly lengthier than the standard-length texts (1-1½ pages) which are proposed by some teachers or commercial textbooks claiming to teach the reading skill. It is assumed that the more reading practice a student has, the more competent a reader that student will become, especially if the subject is familiar, of specific interest, and of use. As a consequence of reading a single, lengthy text, pertaining to the subject of future study, students demonstrated they had acquired and were able to use terminology that they had not known or not used before.

In reality, since all texts were on such a wide variety of different subjects anyway and the same framework was provided for all, the mix of subject interest, on this occasion at least, did not threaten either proceedings or aims. However, minority groups felt like minority groups, and although the audience was attentive, oral presentations would be more meaningful for an audience that shared an academic interest in a topic, the whole event more authentic.

Further due to the autonomy they were afforded, students were able to work at a pace which corresponded to their respective language competence, without being held back, or, conversely, urged ahead by the other students. Meanwhile, the tutor was able to address individual needs as they arose. Such methodology accommodates the range of academic experience and different levels of language competence that inevitably typify group make-up when students are grouped according to subject interest.

The resulting structured task was, by contrast, a formal, shared event, with a simultaneous insistence on nearness to real-world activity. Any poor oral delivery was, of course, exempt from assessment. All students in the study were at least comprehensible and evidenced use of specialist vocabulary that occurred commonly in the text.

Feedback on presentation performance was immediate—with all the implications that this carries—and useful to both presenters and student audience. The presentations well accommodated the detailed and reliable assessment of each student's competence in the reading skill and related skills, while reports, based on the tutor's observations, proved also to be a helpful source of reference for the attention of course tutors, specialist lecturers, and sponsoring bodies.

**REFINING THE APPROACH**

There emerged from the trialing certain points for future consideration. In the first place, it is felt that the grouping of students should correspond as closely as possible to subject interest. Students of Business Management, it seems, might be well-placed with students of Marketing, and Economics, for instance. This warrants closer investigation and the formulation of concrete guide-lines.
Of course, it cannot be expected that inexperienced readers who only enrol for the September Pre-Sessional programme can achieve proficiency without some basic guidance in the skill. For such students, the availability of printed supportive materials for self-study, along with any exercise-check materials would be useful.

Finally, students sometimes leave the course before it ends. In the event of an anticipated absence from presentation sessions in the last week, it is suggested that students submit a written essay for assessment. This would not, indeed, generate the same atmosphere of involvement as a culminating oral presentation, and would not so well expose effectiveness in note-making nor the extent and degree to which the reader has interacted with the text. But it would be better than having no means at all by which to gauge reading competence.

REFERENCES


