

Introducing Reading Skills Using the Course Syllabus

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This lesson illustrates how the syllabus can be used to actively show students what reading techniques they will encounter in a reading course.

Introduction

Tran raises his hand first. Then Rosa, Ping, and Anthony wave their hands excitedly in the air. They have all scanned the syllabus, and within seconds, found the word *objective* in the middle of the page. Thus begins an interactive activity using the syllabus to introduce reading skills students will be developing over the next semester.

Many reading textbooks introduce students chapter by chapter to the skills they need to successfully comprehend and analyze text and improve reading speed. Since many students have usually not had a chance to buy the text on the first day of class, the syllabus is a convenient method of not only introducing course expectations and rules, but actively showing students what reading techniques they will encounter during the semester.

This activity not only introduces students to four basic reading skills (scanning, finding meaning from context, skimming, and summarizing), it gives the teacher insight into the students' grasp of vocabulary, reading comprehension, and comfort level in participating in class.

Method

First, ask if anyone knows what scanning means. Explain that it is a reading skill where your eyes move quickly to find specific information in a text. Next, choose a word from the section you want to cover. Tell students the word and have them scan the page. Instruct them to raise their hand once they have found the word. After most of the students have raised their hands, ask them to help their classmates who have not found the word. Then go over the information in that section of the syllabus. Repeat the process with four or five more words. For example, students are asked to scan the page of the syllabus to find the word *objective*.

ESOL0042 SYLLABUS- SPRING

COURSE MATERIALS

A. REQUIRED TEXTS:

1. More Reading Power, Second Edition, Mikulecky, B., and Jeffries, Longman, 2004. (Compulsory)
2. Twentieth Century American Short Stories, Vol 2: McConochie, Jean, Heinle and Heinle, 1995. (Compulsory)
3. Longman Dictionary of American English, New Edition, Third Edition, Longman, 2004. (Optional)

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION/ COURSE OBJECTIVES AND EXIT COMPETENCIES

This course continues language development through reading comprehension and vocabulary building. It introduces paragraph organization, idiom study, and adapting reading rate for different purposes.

Students will be able to:

1. improve reading comprehension by

a. identifying the main idea (stated and implied)

b. understanding supporting details

Once they have found the word, lead a brief discussion about what objectives are and summarize the objectives you will be covering in this class. Additional words and phrases student scan for in other parts of the syllabus include *excessive absence*, *cheating*, *drop*, and *evaluation criteria*.

The second reading skill introduced is finding meaning from context. Since a department syllabus is used, some students in lower levels might not be familiar with words such as *evaluation criteria*, *text*, or *compulsory*. Students are instructed to look at the information presented (the words surrounding the target words) for clues as to the meaning of the unfamiliar word. Often this means looking for synonyms or words that have the same meaning. In our syllabus under *Required Texts*, the first two books are listed as *compulsory* and the third is listed as *optional*. Have students scan for the word *compulsory*. Ask if they know the meaning of the word. If not, tell them to look for other words near the word that might help them figure out the meaning. Looking in the section heading, students can deduce that *compulsory* is a synonym for *required*. You can also double check comprehension by asking, "Which books do you *have* to buy?" Students are asked to look for synonyms for the following: *text (book)*, *instructor (teacher)*, *course (class)*, and *instructional associate (lab teacher)*.

Once students are comfortable scanning for words and phrases and have practiced finding synonyms, the third reading skill of skimming is introduced. Ask if anyone knows how to skim, and then explain that it is a method of reading quickly to find general information. Point out a section of the syllabus and tell them to read it quickly. It might be helpful to begin with a section that has dates or numbers such as the section below.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Semester holidays: District Conference Days - February 22-23

Spring Break - March 12-16

Spring Holiday - April 6

PTT #1 Midterm: Tuesday, February 27

PTT #2 Final Exam: Tuesday, April 17

Emphasize that in skimming one should not read every word. To help them read quickly, give them a time limit of 30 seconds to one minute depending on the length of the passage. After the time is up, ask them comprehension questions such as

"When is the midterm?" or "Do we have class on February 22?"

Next, assign a passage that includes complete sentences such as the section below on the drop policy.

IV. DROP POLICY AND PROCEDURE

If you are unable to finish the course, either for business or personal reasons, you must officially drop the course. You must fill out a form in the Admissions Office or Multicultural Centre. The last day to drop a course this semester with a "W" is Thursday, April 12. Only you have the authority to drop a course. Your instructor cannot drop you. If you stop coming to class and do not drop the course, you will probably receive a grade of "F".

Students who are receiving any form of financial aid should check with the Financial Aid Office prior to withdrawing from classes. Withdrawals may affect your eligibility to receive further aid and could cause you to be in a position of repayment for the current semester. Students who fail to attend or participate after the drop date are also subject to this policy.

Finally, if you are receiving Financial Aid grants or loans, you must begin attendance in all classes. Do not drop or stop attending any class without consulting the Financial Aid Office. Changes in our enrollment level and failing grades may require that you repay financial aid funds.

Time them for this section. When the time is up, have the students cover the page and tell a partner what they remember. Usually they

are able to convey the most important ideas.

This activity transitions smoothly into the fourth skill, summarizing. Explain that by presenting the information to their partner in the previous activity, they were telling the most important information in a shorter form – they were summarizing. If time allows, have them skim the next section of the syllabus and summarize what they read on paper. This can also be assigned as homework.

Now that students have been guided page by page through the syllabus, they may be assigned to read it again at home for homework. You may opt to use a syllabus quiz to check comprehension. Allowing them to refer to the syllabus to answer the quiz questions provides students with further practice for skimming and scanning. Although four skills are usually more than enough for students to digest the first day, you may opt to introduce other skills using the syllabus. Measuring reading speed, finding topics, and previewing are all well suited to this activity.

Conclusion

In addition to benefiting the student, this activity helps the teacher gauge his or her students' abilities in vocabulary and reading skills. The instructor will get informal yet valuable input about which skills will require a thorough presentation in class and which can be covered quickly as a review. Additionally the teacher gains insight into vocabulary levels (Do students understand the more difficult words? Are they struggling with basic terms?). Finally, the instructor gets a sense of the students' comfort in participating in large group activities and willingness to collaborate in pairs.

References

- Dryden, Irene. "ESOL Reading Syllabus." ESOL 0042 Reading. Department of World Languages, Richland College. 8 Jan. 2008.

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<http://iteslj.org/>

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