Six Tips for Teaching Lower Level Junior High School ESL Students

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Introduction

When I first started teaching weaker learners, I was looking for a way that would help me motivate reluctant readers, who were mainly borderline students and constantly exposed to failure. I didn't have any plan; I just knew there were immediate gaps in their knowledge that needed to be closed.

I looked for ways to motivate my ninth grade students beyond the framework of the text. Many textbooks often have more texts than are needed or texts that may not be suitable in one way or another. In addition, the teacher feels that it is necessary to use additional readings as supplements.

Many of my students became passive when faced with a reading text. I gave them simplified exercises, easier language input, a choice of graded exercises, but this didn't help me with the obstacle of motivating them to read when given a simple text. These students need different techniques or need to be motivated differently. So obviously, the choice of text should not be random. As an ESL teacher, it is important to choose a text that best answers the needs of my students.

Many of these readers have poor reading strategies, others varying degrees of failure, some were too scared to even look at a text. Any teaching strategy has implications to some theory of reading and learning that I have experimented with in the ESL classroom. My approach is based on these understandings:

Tip 1. Teach Topics that are Motivating

Purposely I have chosen the first two important interrelated features that Richard Day points out in "Selecting a Passage for the EFL Reading Class," which have implications for facilitating second-language acquisition – interest and topic. On a cursory glance, I saw the topics in their reading books were culturally and socially removed from their world. Part of getting students interested in reading is to expand the students' knowledge on topics they like. After taking a brief survey, I realized their favorite topic was music. So, when students were presented with a new short text I had written on Oriental and Middle Eastern Music singers, they were more motivated to read. The students also had enough background knowledge on at least one of the themes.

Now that you have wisely chosen a reading passage, how will you exploit the text? What is your reading plan? This brings me to the second tip.

Tip 2. Reluctant Students Need a Step by Step Lesson in Order to Digest Larger Chunks of Text

Start small using bits of text such as word clues, titles and subtitles. Important vocabulary used in a pre-reading activity would serve the purpose of a lead-in to the topic. Keep the number of unknown vocabulary items for each text small allowing a teacher to focus on the goals of the reading course, which is digesting the text or, understanding its deeper meanings. Make sure there are enough warm up and pre-reading activities. Encourage predictions where ever possible. Keep reading passages short and attractive.

Richard Day points out that appearance of the reading passage (layout, print and type size) affects readability. Keep the lines short. This will enhance reading speed. Having a short text is affects its readability and is infinitely better than one long text. Reluctant readers have had many experiences of frustration and failure. Length is a big factor. Paragraphs in each text should be clearly defined. Make sure the font is clear and attractive.

Tip 3. Be Selective and Choosy When Deciding What Text to Use with Your Students

Next time look at the texts from the perspective of your students. Do your reading objectives match the objectives of the unit? Not all texts are exploitable due to their thematic, lexical, syntactic and structural appropriateness. Here are some examples.

- **Lexical exploitability** - Do the texts offer an opportunity to acquire some new vocabulary?
- **Structural exploitability** - Can students explore text meanings through the structure and text conventions?
- **Thematic exploitability** - Does the text have potential for understanding moral issues for example through discussion?
- **Syntactic constructions** - Syntactic constructions in a passage affect its readability. If the texts have new structures that have not yet been covered in class, it might be wise to pre-teach the structure or, choose a text with fewer new grammatical structures.

If a text is exploited well, it will match up with the objectives of the unit and allow the teacher to accomplish the objectives of the reading lesson.

Tip 5. Identifying Phonic and Phonemic Skills are Necessary for a Successful Remedial Reading Program - Automaticity is the Goal

In many of my weaker classes, reluctant learners are also remedial learners who have experienced many failures in reading and tasted very little success.

As part of my reading program design, I take 'inventory' and give mini diagnostic tests at the beginning of the school year.I design questions based on only letter and word level that gives me aclear indication of their decoding abilities.I target those sound blends, vowel sounds, and letter sounds that appear throughout the text that I have chosen and preteach them. Phonemic awareness activities constitute a big part of the lessons for those lower level students who have yet to master basic reading skills. They constantly need help and guidance in recognizing new words. I make sure there are ample opportunities to practice the words with new phonemes and to see them again and again.

Word and letter recognition is the key. "Word recognition is primary and needed for the later work of comprehension" (Purcell-Gates) When I feel students can decode the words, only then do I introduce them in short passages. This builds up their confidence and gives them a reason to continue reading.

According to LaBerge and Samuels, "comprehension is made possible when readers no longer have to expend all of their cognitive attention on the recognition of letters and words….The faster one becomes an automatic decoder – recognizes words without having to break them down and 'figure them out' - - the sooner one can attend to comprehending text."

In light of this, I present the students with a story I have written which includes many words with the targeted cluster as possible in of course, a logical context. The students answer questions about the text, and hopefully, they will be able to decode the appropriate phones and extract the correct meaning in its embedded context. Hopefully, by the end of the unit, the students will have achieved phonemic awareness of this specific phoneme.

Tip 6. Put the Emphasis on Authentic and Meaningful Language Communication in Reading and Speaking

Students remember the targeted words chunks of language when it is taught in a meaningful way. More often than not, this

involves doing something with the language beyond simply digesting it.

Theoretical Underpinnings:

- Reading strategies cannot be taught in isolation
- Reading is comprehension.
- Comprehension involves the construction of individual meanings.
- Learners need to acquire a certain threshold in order to process language deeper.
- Meaningful communication is the goal.
- Learners need language input from all four modes: listening, speaking, reading and writing recycled and in a variety of methods.

"This teaching first involves students in purposeful (to the student) reading and writing, then pulls out some skills –ranging from decoding to text structure and comprehension – for focused work." (Pursell-Gates)

Final Words

It is easy (and natural) for a new teacher starting out to put heavy stress of skills grammar, vocabulary development, punctuation, word-attack drills only to realize that s/he hadn't closed the gap at the end of the school year. In most cases, textbooks were one step above their abilities and students entered Junior High with a shallow basic understanding of reading. (technical reading) The success of a reading program (can) and should start when the teacher has an adequate picture of the students' reading abilities.

Students, for the most part, are exposed to a variety of teaching and learning strategies. There is much flexibility in terms of curriculum; students are assessed by their reading progress on various tasks and performance tasks. The focus is on meaningful communication and not simple technical 'shallow' reading or minimal understanding. The program is based to give them tools for learning independence thus making them less teacher dependent.

Works Cited

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