

## Encouraging noticing

In most coursebooks, the majority of exercises around reading texts are skills-oriented. Students are asked to skim, scan, read for gist, infer meaning, guess unknown words and so on. There is much evidence to suggest that students who are already literate in their own first language can simply bring these skills with them when they deal with texts in a second language. The dominance of skills-based lessons suggests the continuing influence of *schema theory*. This theory proposes that we learn to read faster and to get meaning from texts as a result of our previous knowledge of similar kinds - or genres - of texts, and the degree to which any given text meets our expectations. This is also known as *top-down processing* (as opposed to *bottom-up processing* which suggests that meaning is built up from letters and / or sounds to words, and then from words to sentences, etc.)

However, there is actually remarkably little evidence to suggest that the *schema theory* is correct. Most recent studies in Britain have suggested that first-language learners learn to read best through *phonics*, where the sounds of letters are learnt first and then students learn how to blend the sounds into words and so on (i.e. bottom-up processing). Whilst some *top-down processing* may be involved in the reading and interpretation of texts, it seems likely that, in both first and second languages, the most important factor is actually the learning and quick recognition of lexis. In essence, the best readers are those that know the language best! Obviously, knowing language does not mean just knowing a list of single words, but rather knowing thousands of different combinations of words. If we want to facilitate this kind of knowledge in our students, we have to make sure that they not only read and enjoy and want to discuss texts, but also that they *notice* the language the meanings come wrapped up in. There is a tendency for students to consume texts in much the same way as children consume chocolates: to get straight to the sweet without paying much attention to the wrapper! So how we can encourage noticing?

Well, perhaps the most important technique relates to what we do when we see students underlining new vocabulary in texts as they read. Take the following extract from a Pre-Intermediate reading text, for instance:

*I then notice what he HAS bought. He's got six tins of pineapple because they were on special offer; two kilos of cheese - it was reduced because tomorrow is its sell-by date; and a large jar of chocolate spread because he likes it. When I complain about this he gets upset. He says he was only trying to help, and tells me that I can do the shopping next time if I don't like the way he does it.*

As students are reading, and you walk round the class seeing how they're getting on, it's quite possible that you'll notice students underlining words - and usually, it is just single words - like *tins*, *reduced*, *sell-by*, *jar*, *upset*. Once students have finished reading the text and have done whatever task you previously set, you can then ask them to find someone in the class who can explain any new language from the text to them. As they are doing this, it gives you time to get some writing up on the board to round up with. The board might end up looking something like this:

## Teaching with *Innovations* – Module 2: Teaching Reading

*I ended up buying ten tins of... pineapple.*

*It was ... sale. It was reduced from fifty pounds  
..... to twenty!*

*We'd better t..... this a... .... It's way past its  
sell-by date.*

*Where did you put that jar of ... spread?*

*He got really upset when I... him where his  
girlfriend was.*

You can then explain the words using the context from the text. You can use similar context and also add to some of the sentences or elicit missing words. Thus, you can explain that a tin is a metal container for food, and ask the class what other products come in tins. You can try to elicit the prepositions *on* (sale) and *down* (to twenty); you can point to the sell-by date on something in the class or read out an imaginary sell-by date and mime throwing something away; you can ask what other kinds of food come in jars and maybe write some of these up on the board.

With *upset* you can ask for any other reasons or situations why somebody might get upset, pointing out that we usually say *get upset*. This ensures students end up with written records of usage for new language items, and covertly sends out messages about the kind of things worth looking out or noticing when reading. The focus moves away from a traditional: "Are there any words you don't know?" and towards a rather different "Did you notice how these words were used?"

In the *Innovations* series, the majority of exercises that come after reading and listening texts operate in a similar way. There are activities which ask students to match the verbs used in the texts with the nouns they are collocated with. In another activity format students are given some key words and asked to see how much of the language that surrounded these words they can recall. There are activities which give gapped sentences and ask students if they can remember the missing words. There are activities which take key adjectives and nouns from the text and explore other ways they can collocate. In all cases the teacher can then go through answers with the class: explaining, exemplifying and expanding on some of the vocabulary.

This kind of focus on the language contained within texts has a slow but sure effect on the kind of noticing students do. It gradually trains them to pay more attention to and keep better records of the language they meet in texts when they read for pleasure outside of the classroom.

Hugh Dellar – September 2006