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THE ROLE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION

Teaching reading has become a central issue in a secondary school, at the English lessons in particular. Reading proficiency is one of the most essential and fundamental skills crucial to most, if not all academic learning and success in school. All other educational goals are somewhat dependent on a student's ability to read.

Reading comprehension means both the rapid and accurate relationship between sound and letter and the relationship between the sound and letter with the meaning of what the student reads. Thus, the aim of teaching reading should be to acquire a high level of mastery of the reading skills; this allows achieving the result of the reading process itself – a quick and high-quality extraction of information [2]. Addressing this challenge requires innovative approaches that engage students and foster their reading skills effectively. One such approach is the usage of authentic materials, which offer learners exposure to real-world language functioning and contexts.

Authentic materials play a crucial role in promoting reading comprehension skills for several reasons. First, they are relevant to learners' interests, experiences, and everyday lives, which can increase motivation and engagement. Next, authentic materials expose students to the nuances of natural language usage, including phrasal verbs, idioms, colloquial expressions, and slang, enhancing their comprehension skills within these vocabulary units. In addition, authentic texts embed language within authentic contexts, helping students develop a deeper understanding of cultural practices, viewpoints, and socio-cultural norms. Finally, they often present authentic problems or challenges for students to solve, fostering critical thinking skills and higher-order cognitive processes.

Alongside the benefits of using authentic resources for reading comprehension instruction, it is necessary to consider some challenges. For instance, authentic texts can be more difficult and complex than artificially created materials which can be a barrier to comprehension for some students. Furthermore, authentic materials may contain cultural and linguistic phenomena that are unfamiliar to students, and it can make the comprehension process more complicated.

To select authentic materials for implementation in a secondary school, it is important to take into account the needs of schoolchildren, their age, psychological peculiarities, hobbies, and interests. Although listening and oral comprehension develop naturally, reading comprehension requires explicit teaching. Learners need to be motivated and interested in reading to become successful readers. Nevertheless, if they do not have the necessary skills or interest in the content of the texts they read, students may lose desire to read. That is where the importance of using authentic texts to teach reading arises [1].

In the process of reading authentic texts such as excerpts from works, short stories, and plays of English and American writers, learners have the opportunity to feel the atmosphere of that time, which is described in the work. They can learn how people of other countries lived in different historical epochs, about their customs, traditions, way of life, clothes, occupations, norms of behaviour in various situations, their speech, and the peculiarities of the language of that time, etc. Furthermore, reading authentic texts enriches vocabulary and develops critical thinking.

To improve secondary school students' reading comprehension skills and ensure the maximum engagement of all learners during the lesson, it is important to use properly selected or designed pre-, while- and post-reading activities. Below, a set of exercises that is aimed at teaching reading to secondary school students is presented. These activities encompass three stages for teaching phonetic, lexical and grammatical skills. Moreover, they affect other types of speech activity, namely listening, writing and speaking, which shows their versatility and consistency.

Pre-reading tasks *aim* is to raise the readers' knowledge of what they are about to read and generate ideas related to the topic. The following techniques can be used:

1. *Brainstorming*: discuss in pairs and groups what students know about the topic.
2. *Quizzes*: pair or group work to reveal students' prior knowledge.
3. *Describe pictures* that are related to the topic.
4. *Skimming* the first paragraph for gist, predicting the plot.
5. *Analysing new vocabulary*, e.g. matching the words with their definitions.

The above-mentioned activities can be followed by *while-reading tasks* that should be done in pairs or groups. At this stage, a teacher can use the following techniques:

1. *Jigsaw reading*. It is an organization technique that is based on breaking up longer texts into smaller chunks of text. They are short, one to two paragraphs long. Students work together in groups to become experts on them. Next, each student moves into a new group, in which every member has become an expert on a different part of the text. The learners then take turns teaching their new group about their part of the text. This activity emphasizes cooperative learning by allowing students to help each other comprehend.

2. *Reading Race*. Students have to work in pairs. The text for reading is placed on the wall at one end of the room. Student A is asked to sit down at the other end of the classroom, take a list of questions, and read them to Student B one by one. Student B has to run down the classroom to find the answers in the text, and then run back to dictate them to student A. The pair who answers all the questions first is the winner.

3. *Exchange of texts*. Learners are asked to bring in interesting authentic texts that they can find as a home task using the Internet. Next, the students submit them to the class text bank. Everyone selects a text to read at home at the weekend. Finally, students discuss what they have read with the ones who originally submitted the corresponding texts.

The next stage is post-reading tasks that include:

1. *Comprehension questions*. Students can review the text to identify important information, such as key ideas, events, characters, etc. Then, they are to use this information to create a list of comprehension questions that they think would be relevant for others to answer. After the questions are created, students have to exchange them with each other and answer them in writing or during a class discussion. This activity encourages learners to think critically about the text and demonstrate their understanding of it, alongside providing an opportunity to practice students' own writing and comprehension skills.

2. *Multiple choice questions* provide a passage and students are asked to select which choice best summarises the text from a list of options. They are an effective way to measure the knowledge or understanding of a particular concept. This type of exercise encourages learners to think critically and supports practice in reading for information.

3. *Summarizing*. To help learners sum up, graphic organizers are of great help. After reading the text, learners are asked to draw what happened first and to make a note telling about their drawings. Next, they have to add sketches and notes until they include four of the most important or main events describing what happened at the beginning, middle, and end.

4. *Debates* are useful to encourage critical thinking, research skills, and persuasive speaking abilities while discussing the benefits and challenges of some notions.

The tasks based on authentic tasks are engaging, dynamic, relevant to everyday life, and student-centered. With the help of authentic materials, students can be scaffolded from reading assignments in the classroom to the texts they will come across and abilities they will require outside of the classroom [3].

Thus, concentrating on the implementation of authentic materials playfully, through discussions and group work can be fun and it leads toward the goal of developing secondary school students' reading comprehension skills and increasing motivation.

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