

Exploiting a Reading Passage to Teach Different Language Skills through Activity-Based Learning

R. Kalpana^{1*}, R. Senthilkumar² and S. Sankarakumar³

^{1,2,3}Assistant Professor, Department of English, PSG College of Technology, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India; kalpana.ranganathan@gmail.com

Abstract

Graded texts in course books generally contain different reading comprehension passages. An intelligent improvisation on the part of the teacher would help him/her go a long way in exploiting the text book for teaching different items of language, reading skills, grammar and other academic skills. This article is an attempt to formulate more creative ways of using a simple reading passage for teaching different skills, subskills of reading, vocabulary and grammatical items through activities. Instead of frantically hunting down new materials, the teacher can save a huge amount of time and energy. Further, it is also time for the teachers to explore ways of making learning more activity based. These activities would not only cater to different learning styles of learners, but would also make classrooms more interactive, learner-centred and fun-filled. This paper explicates how to build interesting activities around a reading passage with a specific skill/skills focus and also give a step by step description of how these activities can be executed in the classroom.

Keywords: Activity-Based Learning, LSRW Skills, Pre/Post/While-Reading/Summarising/Paraphrasing/Vocabulary

1. Introduction

Ever since the advent of globalisation, teaching a foreign language, especially English, has gained considerable attention in most countries around the world. Looking out for appropriate and effective teaching materials and using them productively in classrooms take up a lot of the teachers' thinking space. Curriculum designers are sometimes forced to customise the syllabus design to suit the existing materials. Adding to these challenges are the following concerns: a) The traditional lecture mode of teaching is not always effective, given the charged teenagers with very high energy levels and short attention spans. B) The lecture mode does not cater to the learners with different learning styles. Hence, it is very important for a teacher to make classrooms more democratic

and lively, instead of passionately clinging on to the dry and exerting lecture method. This paper looks at ways of using a single reading passage to teach/review different language skills and weaving various activities around the passage, thus minimising the time spent on locating different materials for teaching/practising different language items. The three stages of reading, namely pre-reading, post-reading and while-reading, can be taught using these activities. Further, higher academic skills such as summarising, paraphrasing and items of vocabulary can be also be reviewed/taught effectively in the classroom through these activities. The passage "Mobile phones" that has been used for this application is presented in the Appendix and thematically too the current generation of learners can easily relate to this. The activities presented here are just examples to indicate the scope contained in

*Author for correspondence

these passages to build different kinds of activities. With a little creativity and imagination, this can be extended to any material in language/literature classrooms.

1.1 Prereading - Text Prediction

Name/Type of Activity: Relay Writing - Individual Work followed by Group Work.

Time: 12 minutes.

Classroom Materials Required: Paper strips/ Chalkboard/LCD.

Skills Involved: Reading, Writing, Grammar and Word Order.

The teacher flashes the title on the screen and asks each student (individually) to write down at least two general questions related to the topic, which strike them first as they read the topic. Students are then divided into groups and are then requested to brainstorm the questions in groups and write them in a sheet of paper. When the teacher says “Start”, the group passes the strip on to the group on their right, which in turn passes the strip to the group on the right. This process is continued till all the groups read all the questions put down by different groups. In a plenary, the teacher can check the similarities and differences between the questions. This also gives the teacher time to put the appropriate pre-reading questions, by carefully avoiding the ones brought up by the students. The teacher can now throw his/her own pre-reading questions. It can be seen that the majority of talking and working is done by students and the teacher’s role is merely restricted to giving the right instructions and maintaining a strict timing for the activity, except for those questions she poses to tune the students into reading the text. Some sample pre-reading questions that can be asked by the teacher are given in the box below:

How many of you don’t use mobile phones?
 For how many hours do you use them?
 What do you think are some of the health hazards of using mobile phones?

1.2 While-Reading Activity 1

Name/Type of Activity: Line Jump - Individual, Pair and Group Work.

Time: 12-15 minutes.

Skills Focussed: Reading, Speaking, Listening, Grammar, Word Order.

Classroom Materials Required: Handouts containing multiple choice questions based on the reading passage, a sample of which is given below:

Microwave ovens and mobile phone antennas are very different from each other.

(Yes/No/Not Given)

Researchers suggest wired devices in place of wireless devices.

(Yes/No/Not Given)

There is conclusive proof that heavy use of mobile phones will cause cancer.

(Yes/No/Not Given)

Learners are asked to read the passage individually and discuss the answers for the multiple choice questions in pairs. They are then formed into groups of 6. The students are asked to crosscheck the answers in groups and come to a consensus regarding the answers. Each group has to select a representative. These representatives are asked to come to the front and organise themselves according to their heights, with the shortest standing in the first, facing the class. The answers are elicited through the line jump activity. The teacher reads out the question and the participants are asked to jump to the right if the answer is “Yes” and to the left if it is “No” and stand right there if the answer is “Not Given”. The advantage of this activity

is that it can be used even in a class of 60 because even if 6 groups are formed, there are just 6 representatives who would come to the front to represent their group.

1.3 While-Reading Activity 2

Name/Type of Activity: ‘Look Under the Chair’ – Individual/Whole Class Activity.

Time: 10 minutes.

Classroom Materials Required: Paper strips containing vocabulary questions and answers, Blu tack.

Skill Focussed: Vocabulary-Collocations.

The same text can be used to teach vocabulary items as well. Some uncommon words and phrasal verbs are to be chosen by the teacher and the meanings of these words are written in different strips and stuck underneath the chairs randomly. It is to be noted that this has to be done in a discreet manner without the students knowing it (probably with the help of class representative during the break before the start of the class). The strips are put in a hat or cover and the teacher can either call out the students roll number randomly, after which the students pick up any chit and he goes around finding the answer stuck underneath different chairs at any random order.

A variation of this activity is given below:

Name and Type of Activity: Finding the Pair- “I have the question, who has the answer?” – Pair Work.

Time: 10 minutes.

Classroom Materials Required: Paper strips containing vocabulary questions and answers, Blu tack.

Strips containing questions can be given to one set of learners. The meanings of these uncommon words can also be written in separate strips and given to a different set of learners at random. These learners can be asked to find his/her pair containing the corresponding question/answer word, thus turning it into the “finding the pair

activity”. The remaining members of the class then participate in approving or disapproving the pair based on their choices. The same activity can be used for teaching and reviewing antonyms, literary terms in literary texts, collocational pairs and so on. A sample of the classroom material is given below:

Items	Questions	Answers
Collocation pairs	Greater/long term/conduct	Risk/exposure/studies
Figures of speech	Metaphor	Extended simile
Synonyms	Potential	Capability

1.4 Post-Reading – I

Name/Type of Activity: Gallery Walk.

Time: 15 minutes.

Skills Focussed: Reading, Listening, Speaking.

Materials Required: Charts, Handouts with reading questions, a sample of which is given below:

1. According to the text, do mobile phones lead to brain tumours?
A) Yes, B) No, C) Not Sure.
2. The year 1990 is mentioned in the text because this was when mobile phones:
A) Came into active use, B) Were invented, C) Caused cancer, D) Gained popularity.
3. Which of the following is NOT mentioned in the article?
A) Video game consoles, B) Digital televisions, C) Laptop computers.

The students are given charts which contain post-reading questions and they are asked to come with answers for them. Each group is requested to stick the charts in different corners of the room. Following this, each group is asked to walk around the gallery (the classroom), read the answers and note down the corrections, if any on the chart. They are also requested to note them down in groups. This activity is then followed up with a whole class activity, wherein the teacher reviews the answers and provides feedback. This activity allows scope for peer feedback and some movement in the class.

1.5 Post-Reading – II

Name and Type of Activity: Corners - Individual followed by Pair Work.

Time: 10 minutes.

Classroom Materials Required: Charts, Blu tack.

Purpose: Evaluative comprehension on what's appealing about the tone and language of the passage.

This activity would be specifically useful for teaching literary passages/texts.

The teacher posts visuals/lines indicating the tone/theme of the text in each corner of the classroom. She gives a brief explanation of what is posted with a sample. She then asks the students to decide which corner they would like to go to and why. The students go to the corners and pair up with a partner. This pair shares ideas about what they found appealing about the message or tone and also picks evidence from the passage to substantiate why they chose the particular corner. Students repeat this task with several other students in their "corner" (number of partners decided on by the teacher). When the students have finished talking with their various partners, the teacher checks for completion of the activity and may extend the conversations.

Tone corner	Theme corner	Relevant examples	
Sceptical Persuasive Didactic	Hazards of mobiles Importance of mobile phones Role of technology		

Having dealt with different activities for reading, the teachers can also use the same text to teach summary writing and paraphrasing as well. Summarising and paraphrasing skills are fairly advanced skills which most teachers tend to give less attention to and these skills can be taught in an interesting manner through activities, as given below:

Type of Activity: Reordering Sequence strips: Group Work.

Skills Focussed: Reading and Summarising.

Time: 15 minutes.

Classroom Materials Required: Cut up strips/ Paraphrase of the passage.

Prior to the activity, the teacher can take up any single paragraph and demonstrate for how to locate the main idea and eliminate the supporting arguments and examples that are redundant for a summary. She can then cut the entire passage into five or six different sections. The cut up strips are shuffled and each group is handed over one of these cut up strips. The learners are asked to work in groups to identify the main ideas in each section/strip. The learners are then asked to write these main ideas in groups, make notes of the important points by eliminating all amplifications, examples and restatements. In short, they are made to follow the steps of any process of developing a summary. Following this, they are asked to reorder the strips to form a coherent, meaningful summary. These individual summaries can be sent around to different groups for peer evaluation.

Type of activity: Running dictation/sequence strips:
Group Work.

Skills Focussed: LSRW skills and Paraphrasing.

Time: 15 minutes.

Classroom Materials Required: Cut up strips/
Paraphrase of a passage, a sample of which is given below.

<p>Original</p> <p>The main problem with the current research is that mobile phones have only been popular since the 1990s. As a result, it is impossible to study long-term exposure to mobile phones.</p>
<p>Paraphrase:</p> <p>Mobile phones have started gaining popularity only after the 1990's. Therefore, it is not possible to study long-term exposure to mobile phones.</p>

As an advanced academic skill, paraphrasing is always a challenging task to be taught or reviewed. To begin with the teacher, she can choose certain sentences from the text or use the same summary and paraphrase the sentences using different strategies. These sentences can be flashed on screen. The learners can be asked to read the original text and find out the original sentence that has been paraphrased.

As a variation of this activity, running dictation method can also be used wherein the longer sections are stuck on walls in different parts of the classroom (and even outside the classroom, if needed). The students are divided into groups and each is appointed a writer. The others act as runners and speakers and when the teacher says "Start", they go read the texts in turns, memorise them, run back and dictate them to the writer. The activity continues until all the strips have been dictated to the

writers in groups. Collectively, they figure out the paraphrases that match those parts of the original text.

2. Conclusion

The following questions and doubts arise in the mind of any teacher when they think about the workability and functionality of these activities. Some of these questions and possible suggestions are given below:

- Is it practically possible to do all these activities in the classroom?
- Yes, the authors have tried these activities in the class with tertiary level learners in their workplace and they welcomed it gladly. We suggest that you try that in parts, one activity at a time, until the teachers get a hang of coordination in material management, time management and effective instructions. The effectiveness of these activities depends on framing right instructions and giving them clearly to the learners.
- It seems to involve a lot of preparation, chart work, strips/envelopes. Isn't it time consuming?
- Yes, it involves a lot of time, but it is possible if teachers come together, work as a team and pool in their resources together and share the preparatory materials. Our experience has revealed that a collective, like-minded set of two/three teachers working with perfect sync can minimize the stress of getting the classroom materials ready. Some of these can be recycled and used across different branches in General English classes. More than external resources, it is the teachers' resourcefulness and creativity that would be of great help.
- Wouldn't the classrooms be noisy?
- Yes, definitely! The teachers need to convince the head of their department and then the manage-

ment that if the students need to speak confidently before strangers in placement interviews, they need to get adequate classroom practice by speaking with familiar people first.

- Some activities have more than one skill focus: Isn't that a bit too ambitious?

It might appear to be so! But in real life, no language skill is learnt in isolation!

4. Appendix

Can talking on a **mobile phone** be **hazardous** to your health? It is difficult to know for sure. Some research suggests that heavy users of mobile phones are at a greater risk of developing cancerous brain tumours. However, many other studies suggest there are no links between cancer and mobile phone use.

The main problem with the current research is that mobile phones have only been popular since the 1990s. As a result, it is impossible to study **long-term exposure** to mobile phones. This concerns many health professionals who point out that certain cancers can take over twenty years to develop. Another concern about these studies is that many have been **funded** by the mobile phone industry or those who benefit from it.

Over five billion people now use mobile phones on a daily basis and many talk for more than an hour a day. Mobile phone antennas are similar to microwave ovens. While both rely on **Electromagnetic Radiation** (EMR), the radio waves in mobile phones are lower in frequency. Microwave ovens have radio wave frequencies that are high enough to cook food, and they are also known to be dangerous to human **tissues** like those in the brain. The concern is that the lower-frequency radio waves that mobile phones rely on may also be dangerous. It seems **logical** that holding a heat source near your brain for a long period of time is a potential health hazard.

Some researchers believe that other types of wireless technology may also be dangerous to human health, including cordless phones, wireless **gaming consoles** and laptop or tablet computers with wireless connections. They suggest replacing all cordless and wireless **devices** with wired ones wherever possible. They also say that many cordless phones can emit dangerous levels of Electromagnetic Radiation even when they are not in use. They even suggest keeping electronic devices such as desk-top and tablet computers out of the bedroom, or at least six feet from the head while we're sleeping.

3. References

- https://startalk.umd.edu/public/system/files/resources/startalk_classroom_activities.pdf
- Rinvolucl M, Davis P. More Grammar Games: Cognitive, Affective and Movement activities for EFL student. <http://www.cje.ids.czest.pl/biblioteka/4549394-English-Teaching-ResourcesMore-Grammar-Games.pdf>
- <https://www.englishclub.com/reading/health/cell-phone.html>

A growing number of health professionals worldwide are recommending that mobile phone users **err on the side of caution** until more **definitive** studies can be **conducted**. They use the example of **tobacco** to **illustrate** the **potential** risks. Many years ago, people smoked freely and were not concerned about the effects of cigarettes on their health. Today, people know that cigarettes cause lung cancer, though it is still unknown exactly how or why. Some doctors fear that the same thing will happen with mobile phones. In May 2016, the UK's Independent newspaper reported on research by the US government's National Toxicology Program that showed a slight increase in brain tumours among rats exposed to the type of radio frequencies commonly emitted by mobile phones. This doesn't prove that mobile phones can cause brain tumours in humans, but it does show that it's possible. As a result, many experts now recommend texting or using headsets or speaker phones instead of holding a mobile phone to the ear.

(source: <https://www.englishclub.com/reading/health/cell-phone.html>)