

## **Engaging the Reluctant Reader through Active Reading Strategies**

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# ENGAGING THE RELUCTANT READER THROUGH ACTIVE READING STRATEGIES

## ABSTRACT

The objective of this workshop is to demonstrate not only how to overcome the fear of reading among young adults but also how to develop affection for it by adjusting student-centred learning strategies to the individual needs of the learners. Reading then becomes an active dialogue session with the author culminating in writing in any genre rather than a passive boring activity. The workshop begins with an incidental lead-in activity connected to the topic of the reading passage, which aims to generate student-centred discussions. This is then followed by a timed individual reading session, where the students have a 'dialogue' with the author of the passage by scribbling and writing in any language or by drawing graphic presentations of their feelings that are generated. A group discussion of the students' reactions to the reading would result in seeing the text in a new light or angle. This is then followed by a spin-off activity, where the students are to translate their reaction to the whole passage or any portion of it into any genre and present it to the others. Once the students have come to grips with the essence of the reading passage, they are to formulate their own question which needs further probing into as a free writing or academic writing piece. An outline of the writing is done in groups and monitored by the facilitator while leaving the complete writing as a take-home assignment.

## INTRODUCTION

### Active Reading

Reading, once considered the essence of education the privilege of the elite or upper class, has cut across class, creed, boundaries and has now become a favourite past time of many. As a free time activity, reading skill remains one of the most desired skill, especially in the era of JK Rowlings series of *Harry Potter*, Lemony Snicket- *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and JRR Tolkiens' *Lord of the Rings*. It stops there.

Given the scenario of the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom, young adults would rather click away at the mouse, browse through interesting and alternative information leaving the actual reading skill to the geek or nerd in class.

In a general sense, reading is what happens when people look at a text and assign meaning to the written symbols in that text. Although the text and the reader are the two physical entities necessary for the reading process to begin, actual reading constitutes the interaction of the two (Aebersold & Field 1997).

Reading is an all important language skill that is now increasingly in demand than in any time in our history. With the exposure of the internet in a global arena, where listening to e-books is becoming the norm, students need to master the techniques needed to enjoy reading in order to understand the vast knowledge the world embraces. As a result, students are now placed at platform level where they are expected to perform at a higher level than the students before them.

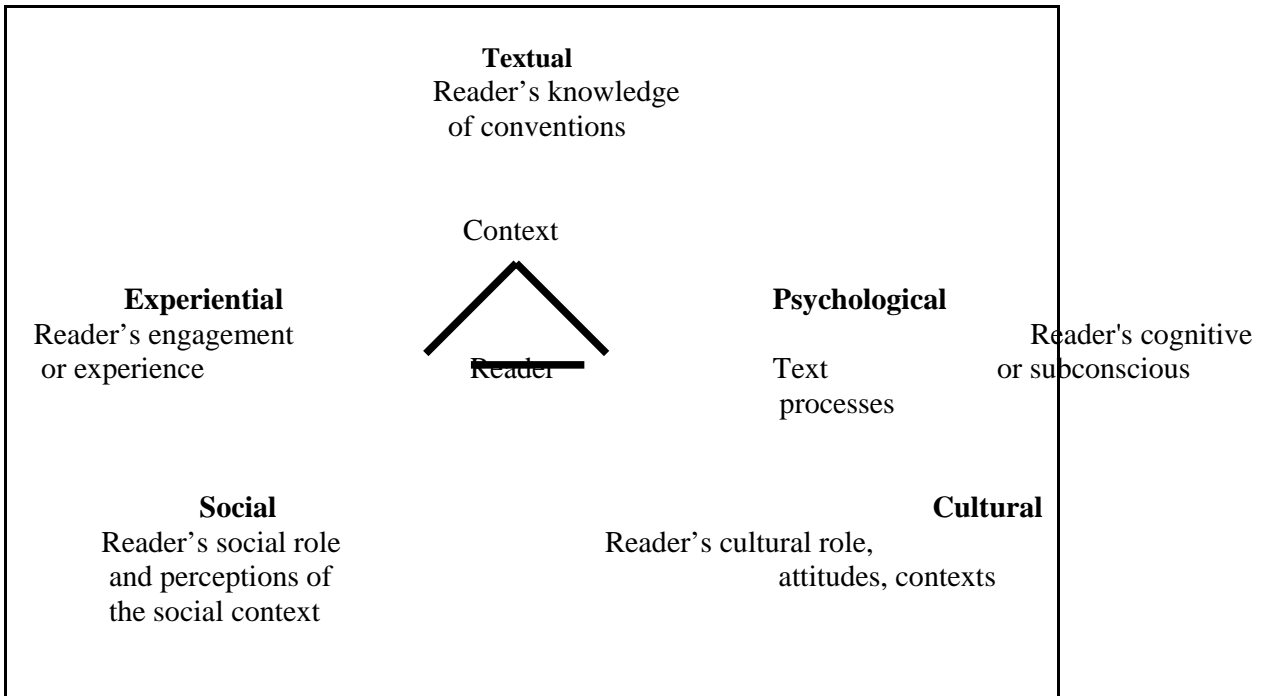
It is the belief of many teaching professionals that the ESL student needs to be able to read at a level challengeable to a native speaker of English in order to keep up with the academic workload and expectations. Time and time again, professionals and sympathizers' of today's ESL students come up with innovative and ingenious methods of injecting fear, fun and learning in the reading skill. By far, these strategies have done their part in instilling and inculcating the reading habit in our young. To complement the skills and strategies of educationists before us and those with an undying devotion to improve standards of ESL learners, our paper aims to implement active reading strategies which are basically student-centred, in which the student takes ownership for reading and comprehension. This will eventually lead to an activity – based learning, the aim, the dream and the ideal of ESL learners today.

We will take you through a step-by-step approach of this strategy – Active Reading – and give reasons why implementing this strategy would benefit our students, especially when the challenge is reversing our students' perception that reading is such a passive activity.

### **Why Active Reading Strategies should be used in the ESL classroom**

Reading, one of the most ubiquitous skills, should be seen as an enjoyable task and not a chore. Everywhere we turn, we are bombarded by the need to read and comprehend. While travelling, while shopping, while out at an exhibition, there is an urgent need for us to read. Reading can be classified as a 'dormant' activity on the outside, but one that needs active involvement of the brain on the inside. This is the essence or the premise on which our paper Active Reading stands. It is undeniable that previous studies done on strategies of the reading skill, for example, predicting, previewing, skimming and scanning, have been complementary to the action research on Active Reading done on this controlled group of students.

A strategy mentioned by Wallace is the ability to make informed predictions as the student progresses through the text (Wallace 1992). Through making predictions, students take an interactive role in the reading process, which Blanton states is “ ..... at the heart of literacy, formal learning, and academic success” (Blanton 1994). This interaction is stimulated by the reader's background knowledge that acts as a catalyst for text comprehension. Afflerbach researched the effects of background knowledge on readers and found that readers who applied background knowledge or had extensive applicable prior knowledge were able to construct the main idea faster than those who didn't (Afflerbach 1990). The diagram below shows how a reader responds to the context and the text using prior knowledge. This strategy plays a very important role when a student embarks on the Active Reading strategy via the teacher's comprehensive instruction.



In a study done by Kitao, pre-reading activities such as ‘read the title’, headings, first lines of the paragraphs for initial gist (Kitao 1994), have unleashed knowledge the students might have about the passage. The other strategies like skimming, scanning, understanding sequence of events or ideas have also helped in making reading an appealing and easy skill for students. Active Reading strategy works on the premise that goes beyond mere comprehension of the text. It works on the premise that the Active Reading strategy is an interactive and student centred strategy that develops in the reader a love for the reading skill outside of the parameters of a test which is highly beneficial in moulding a generation of critical readers.

The first benefit of this strategy is that it is active and not passive. It is active because from the start of the activity, you are discussing in groups, you are putting forth your previous knowledge of the topic and collecting a whole lot of ideas from other group members. Once the actual reading begins, you are in constant dialogue with the author seated in front of you. You are able to identify yourself with the author, disagree or agree with him, laugh at him or cry along with him.

While dialoguing with the author, you have the added advantage of writing down or jotting down your thoughts and feelings in any language or pictorial format. This annotation of your thoughts helps in the thought processing faculty. You will react to the text not only in annotated or written form but also in movement of the facial and body muscles. You react when annoyed, happy or disillusioned by scowling, squinting or making a fist, etcetera.

The next benefit of this Active Reading strategy is when the reader uses his metacognitive skills. The student does not only take in the content of the text, but also uses higher order thinking skills to engage in a debate of the points raised there. When doing this, the student puts to use previous knowledge of the subject and connects it to what is expressed in the text in question. This encourages to the reader to say what is on his mind to respond to the text. Contrary to conventional reading strategies where the reader is reading to look for

information or to answer a few pre-prepared questions, the Active Reading strategy encourages the reader to formulate the questions that arise in the mind regarding the text.

In Active Reading, the student is in 'reading room' where the sky is the limit and no external force is able to limit or inhibit the freedom of word, thought and action of the student. When students are given the freedom to think aloud without restrictions to thought, word and action, they are bound to perform uninhibitedly which develops eventually into well-rounded individuals. The objective of this strategy is to cultivate in the student the right attitude to reading – you do not take everything the author says as gospel truth. The student is encouraged to go to the remote recesses of the brain, challenge the thinking and critical faculties and come up with comments that react to the thoughts and words of the author.

Besides being active and getting the metacognitive skills of the students in action, the Active Reading strategy is one where all the skills of language learning come to play. This skill begins with a topic-based discussion – oral – activity in which every member of the team has to his knowledge or the lack of it on the topic. The teacher would have a list of questions as an incidental lead-in which is within the scope of the students. This activity then leads to the reading skill. The in-depth reading skill is then again followed by a discussion which eventually leads to the presentation of the genre the group has come up with. Once again the students engage in the speaking skill. Last but not least is the actual writing skill where the students write an academic piece based on the discussion, the reading and presentation.

The benefit of the Active Reading strategy, which is a nugget of all skills, is that a single text is 'exploited' in all possible ways, in all possible skills to enhance student learning. By applying almost all the skills of language learning, the student gets to see and use the text until the student knows the topic like the back of his hand.

The final and most effective advantage of the Active Reading strategy is that it is entirely a student-centred learning process. It focuses on the theory that students, after having been given the rubrics, are allowed to learn, absorb, shape, mould, assess, and adapt learning to their individual needs and pace. This is absolutely the theory behind which pre-school educators work where the children are allowed to see for themselves what lies there, within and without the task at hand to build knowledge. Just as our pre-schoolers are allowed into a world of imagination, so should our young adults when a dense or dry reading text would take them to a level where the students are in total control of the situation.

It is student-centred because the strategies involved in Active Reading requires the students to take charge of themselves, be moderators, be initiators and be product presenters, all under the watchful eye of the teacher. The teachers' role would be in giving proper instructions, guiding, setting time and goals and helping out as and when the need arises. In this strategy, the students give feedback at every session before the teacher rounds up the discussion, compiles and explains where improvements could be made.

### **A virtual dialogue with the author**

As opposed to the conventional methods of reading, active reading triggers the questioning and inquisitive impulses of the brain that is the fundamental basis of learning; learning through connection, intuition, questioning and doubting. In the first stage of the Active reading strategy, the students are challenged with the task of sharing or discussing information related to the central idea of the reading text. Most researchers agree that pre-

reading activities can help to eliminate comprehension problems (Graves, Cooke and Laberge 1983). In an informal discussion session, devoid of the threat of assessment and teacher involvement, students become actively participatory of the task at hand. The only drawback of this lead-in activity, given a classroom scenario of an ESL lesson of 1 hour, is the constraints of time. However to sustain the interest and attention span of an ESL learner, a timed activity reaps the desired benefits

Once the students are engaged in the topic at hand, the reading text is handed to them, after having discussed with the group the advantages of a two way dialogue or discussion versus the virtual dialoguing. The task of having to have an intelligent discussion with another ESL learner on a given topic is already daunting enough. What more a virtual dialogue with the author of the text!

Contrary to all these beliefs, fears and assumptions, if Active Reading is administered with proper planning, guidance and purpose, the benefits would emerge for all to see.

When the student is set upon embarking on the task of virtual dialoguing of the text armed with a pen and a comfortable reading position, the expectations, and the rubrics are to explained clearly. While the student is reading the text he is in constant dialogue with the author. At every argument, every point raised, every elaboration the reader is encouraged to use his higher order thinking skills to ask questions, seek clarification, to refute, to contradict, to agree or disagree and to add ideas, thoughts and opinions in the margins on either sides of the reading text. These annotations can be in any language, be it L1, English or sign language.

An annotated reading of a text probes the student's thinking, tickles and excites the reader-response faculty of any learner. Though the fundamental basis of reading material is informative or information providing, an element of novelty and surprise coupled with generating interest is just as fundamental. As the student engages in the reading and carries on a dialogue with the author, prior knowledge of the topic, fears, doubts, anger and other emotions begin to emerge. What emerges as a result of these emotions is annotated.

The next phase sees the readers put in random groups of three or four and instructed to have a discussion of the reading and the many thoughts and feelings annotated. The thought process of the brain set to work where the students are expected to have a healthy discussion or argument of the effects or outcomes of the dialogue with the author. This session also sees peers dishing out reasons and coming up with ways and means to either agree, disagree or refute the author's and group members' viewpoints. When this happens, the students are inadvertently exposed to the sentence 'exuding' a specific meaning, vocabulary, phrases and collocations that are integral when talking about the topic at hand and the general evolving of the writer's ideas cascading down the lines of a page.

In this very important stage of discussion emerges the link to the next stage – a point or argument brought up by the author that needs addressing. By addressing it, an off-shoot of the reading activity will take place that is going to be purely student centred. This controlled group of students would have been exposed to the various genres of writing prior to the introduction of the Active Reading strategy.

Responding to the text – reader response – in the classroom is not limited to written or discussion responses. There is now a widening range of response media, including, for example, oral interpretation, role-playing, artwork, rewriting texts or creating new ones (Corcoran and Evans; McCormick, Waller and Flower; Prothrough; Purves, Rogers and Soter).

The next phase sees the students choosing a response media to respond to the author and his viewpoint. The reader response could be based on the language the author uses, the syntax, the choice of words, the rhetorical style chosen or the content of the writing. The group now decides on a form of a presentation of their view. In this timed activity, students are to paint their thoughts and words either in the form of poetry, an article, a drawing, skit an ad, a slogan, an announcement or any other form that catches the fancy of the group. The word limit I mentioned for each genre except the drawing/illustration.

After having responded to the main point of contention of the reading, the leader or representative of the group is expected to present their case to the class. Once again, students would already have known what to expect of a formal presentation of an academic writing. The presenter would then explain why or what part of the reading or the dialogue with the author has resulted in the genre that is to be presented. After having conveyed this, the presenter presents his groups interpretation, response or the lack of both to the listeners. The presenter has to explain why a certain genre was chosen to express the groups' viewpoint or the lack of it. As this would be an interactive presentation, which engages the listeners, questions will be posed and views will be shared by the listeners. This interactive session might lead the presenters and group members into a better understanding or greater confusion of the comprehension of the text.

The final phase of the activity is the writing activity. Again, in the same groups, students are to develop each genre into an academic writing piece following the principles and conventions of writing. They can choose to use any one or combination of the rhetorical styles to persuade the author to agree with the students. As this is a reader-response activity, the intended audience for the writing piece will be author of the reading article and the purpose would be in line with what the group decided to do. In this phase, the activity to be done in class or under the scrutiny of the facilitator would be the outline of the writing. This is again a timed-activity where the group is able to interact within its members paying attention to vocabulary and phrases related to the topic. The final writing piece is done as a take home assignment.

### **Anticipated short comings**

As with any method of learning, the Active Reading strategy is not without its fair share of short comings. One disadvantage of this strategy would be level of interest of the students to the topic at hand. One way to overcome this would be to conduct an analysis of the preferred topics prior to embarking on this strategy. A search of what students are interested in at the time of a particular lesson would also be productive. Besides, the difficulty of comprehending a text with all the nuances of a language can be intimidating to an ESL learner. However, this can easily be solved by engaging everybody in the group to actively participate and share what they know. It is highly recommended to reward individuals and groups who are able to accomplish a given task within the stipulated time. As is always the case, the presence of free-riders is an inevitable part of a language class. By putting students in groups and by giving them the ownership of the task at hand, the free-rider would have no choice but to take

an active role in participating. The teacher's ingenious role here would be of great help in maximising the benefit of this Active Reading strategy to enhance language acquisition.

## **CONCLUSION**

What the educationists are advocating now is for a generation of students who are independent and critical thinkers, who use their metacognitive intellect to assess, adapt and absorb information and knowledge in several forms around them. What better time than this would it be for us to get our young adults to be engaged when learning a language.

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