

# Teaching Reading



## Introduction

Although this guide is largely aimed at teaching learners with low or no literacy, it will still be useful if you are teaching at a higher level.

There are different theories and methods in this area. I have mostly used the ideas of Marina Spiegel and Helen Sunderland and my experience of teaching Beginner language learners using their methods, which I believe are easy to follow and effective for the learners we're working with.

One of the key features of this type of teaching/learning is using language which is relevant to the learner. This is often functional language - signs, address, letters from school, names - but if your learner is into poetry then read some simple poems too.

It's impossible to separate reading and writing from each other or from speaking and listening. Consider the simple act of making a GP appointment: you speak and listen to the receptionist over the phone; note the date and time in your diary/phone/calendar/scrap of paper then read this back to yourself nearer the time to check. So although in a lesson you will sometimes focus for a time just on reading or just on writing, be aware of other skills that you and the learner are using at the same time and that this reflects 'real life'. This is also motivating for the learner; if they can speak better than they can read, there is at least one part of the lesson or activity which is easier and where they feel more confident.

The alphabet is a popular place to start, however it's often more relevant and useful to start with the learner's name and address, which will have most of the letters of the alphabet in it anyway. Names of other family members are also a good starting point. But if the learner really wants to start with the alphabet, then start with it.

Finally, never forget: a beginner reader/writer is not a beginner thinker. All of our learners have a huge amount of skills and knowledge in other areas: childcare, mechanics, cooking, communication, farming, business, driving etc.

## Definitions

Throughout this guide I've used the word 'text' in its broadest sense. It could mean one word or a sign, billboard, text message, addressed envelope, note, gas bill, letter or newspaper article. We're much more likely to be working at the start of this list.

## Reading – what skills are involved?

Reading is a highly complex process in which fluent readers use a combination of skills. Once we have recognised these skills, we can teach someone else how to read. With learners who have some Literacy in another language, ask them to think about the skills they use when reading in that language and simply transfer them to English.

### 1) Schema – background and cultural knowledge

It's not just the words in a text which allow us to fully understand it. For example, if I see the following headline:

**Gove U-turn on return to two-tier school system**

I am using background knowledge to decipher its meaning. I saw this in a newspaper so I know that it is reporting a recent development in either current affairs or the world of celebrity. I listen to the news daily so I know that 'Gove' means Michael Gove, Education Minister, and that he wants to reform secondary education. I know from talking to my parents that there used to be a system of Grammar and Secondary Modern schools. In this case a literate learner new to the UK may need help with some of the background knowledge.

### Teaching tips

There are many texts which non-literate learners have the background knowledge to decode. Take a paracetamol packet: everyone knows that tablets come in this size and shape of packet and recognises the picture of the tablet on the front. The fact that it was seen in a chemists shop helps to confirm what it is.

### 2) Size, shape, layout, colour and font size

Texts have many features which give us clues as to what they are before we even start reading, or decide whether or not we need to read them at all. For example, you know what a gas bill is before you actually read it from the company logo and colours, size, company contact details in a box down the side and the £ followed by a (usually large) number in a larger font at the end. Many texts now also involve visual information such as photos, graphics and illustrations which aid understanding.

### Teaching tips

When working with a new text, start by discussing with the learner what it *is* (simply ask 'What's this?'). This is why real texts are best: if you use an envelope which came through the door this morning the learner will know that the writing on the front is their name and address, but if you write it on a piece of A4 lined paper they might not.

### 3) Skimming, scanning and re-reading

We rarely read a text from start to finish and then stop, even a short one. We skim read to see if something is worth reading, scan for specific information and also re-read and move forwards and backwards through a text.

#### Teaching tips

Model these techniques using the eyes and finder/pen and encourage the learner to use them rather than always moving rigidly from start to end.

### 4) Whole word recognition

When we read, our eye sees whole words rather than individual letters. Often beginner readers use this method exclusively and can therefore recognise some familiar words, not necessarily 'easy' ones (eg tribunal, consultant, Chapelton). Whole word recognition is particularly useful for very visual people. However it shouldn't be the only reading strategy that a learner uses as it can't be used to 'decode' new words.

#### Teaching tips

This method involves remembering either the whole word or common patterns within words such as -tion, -ing using **size, shape and length**. The word should be written out clearly then the learner draws around it with a finger or pen/pencil to reinforce the shape. They might also cut it out or trace it on the palm of their hand or in the air. When words are learnt in this way, make sure that the learner also knows them orally.

### 5) Sound-letter correspondence

This is the connection between the letter/s on the page and the sound/s we make when we say them out loud or in our heads, eg the letter **d** nearly always corresponds to a /d/ sound. The phonic method of reading currently used in primary schools relies very heavily on letter-sound correspondence, but English is not a phonetically spelt language: think of how many different spellings there are for the long /ee/ sound - believe, see, beat, complete. So it's useful, but in combination with other methods.

#### Teaching tips

This enables learners to 'sound out' new words and make at least an educated guess as to the correct sounds. When teaching sound-letter correspondence it's recommended that you work systematically through the sounds (see below), taking note of any knowledge the learner already has and making sure the words are relevant ie not 'the cat sat on the mat', unless this is what happens in their house on a regular basis. Although you may be focusing on say the /ee/ sound, other sound-letter combinations will come up in the lesson, just don't make them the main focus.

1. Initial single consonants eg **Maryam**
2. Initial single short vowel sounds eg **egg**
3. Final single consonants eg **sad**
4. Middle single vowels in short words eg **bed**
5. Initial and final double consonants eg **sh, bl, nd, ng**
6. Long vowel sounds and double vowels eg **came, receipt, see**

## 6) Breaking words down

This makes new words far less intimidating and is an important skill for learners to acquire and start using without you prompting them. It also helps with spelling.

- Short words into their individual sounds eg c-u-p
- Longer words into syllables eg in-for-ma-tion

The following methods combine some or all of the above.

## 7) Language Experience

This uses the learner's own words and is particularly useful for lower level learners but can be used at any level. It is collaborative, so perfect for 1-1 teaching. Interest and motivation are high because the learner reads words that they have spoken. Also, there is no preparation involved; the work is done within the lesson. Here's how it's usually done, although feel free to vary:

- Have a conversation together about a set topic: today's weather, family, likes/dislikes etc. Or just ask the learner to say their/their family's name/s.
- Either during the conversation or after, write what the learner said. You should write exactly what they said, but if it's inaccurate ('weather cloudy today') then help the learner to make it accurate *before* writing, using suggestions and questions ('what word do we need before weather?'/ 'cloudy? is cloudy?'). Write a continuous text, not a list of separate sentences.
- On a new piece of paper or several, write each word or sentence (or both) separately. Use these for...
  - Reading back: first you and the learner together, then the learner alone, with you joining in again if needed. Encourage the learner to run their finger along as they read. Correct and encourage self-correction as you go along, but sometimes at the end to allow the learner to say the whole thing without interruption.
  - After reading the whole word/sentence several times (more than you think you need to) at the learner's own pace, focus back on a particular part/sound that was tricky.
  - Cut up the word/sentence then the learner puts them back together.
- Always end with the learner reading the entire text (whether a few words or 100) alone at least once. Focus on rhythm and intonation to avoid monotone.
- The text can then be used in this or later lessons for more reading practice, handwriting practice or to introduce spelling, punctuation or grammar.
- Always give the learner everything you have produced in the lesson so that they have ownership of their work and can practice in between. Come back to each text and all its pieces of card/paper to revise and check what has been retained, during the next lesson and a few lessons later.

## Sample text

**My name is Sabahat.**

Future work: capital/fullstop (sentence and name), final e makes middle vowel 'long', /a/ sound, my/his/her name is..., final /t/ sound, /ai/ sound and it's different spellings, is/are, subject/object/verb word order in other sentences eg 'His hair is...' etc.

### 8) Using authentic texts 'above' the level of the learner

It can be beneficial to use a text which the learner cannot read all or most of, but which they can still access. Taking our earlier example of a Paracetamol packet:

- Discuss shape, colour and size of packet
- Discuss shape, colour and size of text
- Use pictures to work out meaning
- Recognise features such as bold and tables for important information
- Read numbers and use these to work out further information eg what 'per day' means
- Read known words within the text and guess at others by sounding out the start or end
- Have fun learning to pronounce 'paracetamol' – often an important word whatever the level of their student, especially if they have children
- Allow the learner to gain confidence from the realisation that they actually can read after all, and that this does not always mean reading every word of a text.

### 9) Paired reading

This is a classroom method but can easily be adapted for 1-1 teaching. Don't use it if your learner finds it annoying or a hindrance, some people prefer to work alone.

- Take in turns to read aloud to each other, several times each
- Stop at different points (but not too much) to discuss – in a longer text 'what has happened', 'who is this about?' etc., in a very short text discuss sounds, spelling, why the capital letters are there, what a word means. This encourages interest in the text, making it more than just an arduous task.
- Leave corrections until the end of each text/sentence to encourage a good flow, with the right rhythm and intonation.

**And finally**, remember the techniques learned in training, many of which can be used to develop reading skills: sorting and matching (eg picture to word), labelling (eg objects with post-its), gap fill, putting words into categories (eg food), games etc.