

# Interactive Reading Activities

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## **Abstract**

*Instructors of English courses and students alike tend to view reading as a mostly solitary activity with interaction limited to reader and text. Classroom interaction with reading texts is often limited to the teacher eliciting answers to comprehension and vocabulary questions, and students calling out responses. Teachers sometimes fail to see how reading texts can be used in interactive activities that require spoken communication beyond questions and responses and incorporate a variety of skills. This article explores how reading and interaction influence language development and introduces a number of interactive reading activities teachers can take into their classrooms.*

**Keywords:** *reading instruction, reading activities, interactive language teaching, English language teaching tasks*

## **The importance of interaction in language learning**

Interaction is a fundamental part of second language acquisition. Input alone is not enough to develop language skills (Gass, Behney, and Plonsky, 2013). Language learners also need opportunities for output, which provide opportunities for interaction; under the umbrella of interaction, learners gain from negotiation of meaning, feedback, and attention to form. Many second language researchers (e.g., Artigal, 1992; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Swain, 2000; Vygotsky, 1987) have asserted that spoken interaction is an essential aspect of second language development. Interaction is not only important to the development of language skills. It fosters other important skills as well. According to Stahl (1995), studies on cooperative learning have shown that students who participated in cooperative learning groups generally had higher academic scores, higher self-esteem, better social skills, more openness and sensitivity to other races, and, typically had a better grasp of the subject matter and materials studied.

## **The importance of reading**

Intuitively, instructors know that that reading is important for their students. They know that reading develops intellectual and academic growth, but exactly what are the benefits of amount of exposure to print, i.e., does more exposure result in better skills and higher achievement? Stanovich et al. conducted a number of empirical studies (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998; Stanovich, 2000; Stanovich et al., 1996; Wagner and Stanovich, 1996) with students of different ages and levels of development in a variety of educational contexts. The results showed that there is a strong correlation between amount of exposure to print and reading skills, spelling, vocabulary development, and verbal fluency as well as cultural and general knowledge (Grabe, 2002). While these studies imply a certain amount of exposure to text that does not necessarily occur only within the realm of classroom activities, we can still ascertain from this the fundamental importance of reading. Knowing this, even in our oral communication courses, we can make reading a major part of the given input. Of course,

exposure to reading texts should not be limited to in-class interactive reading activities, but interactive reading activities can be a part of the reading regime.

### **A marriage of reading and interaction**

Given that both reading and interaction are extremely important to language development, interactive reading activities can be a means of significant input through relevant reading texts as well as a means of significant output in the form of classroom interaction. Students gain not only from having the opportunity to practice language and the learning inherent in pair and small group work, such as learning to state one's ideas and listen to others, but also from obtaining the kind of knowledge they might encounter in a reading text. By working with their peers, students can develop a deeper understanding and more varied interpretation of a text (Rivers, 1987).

### **Common exercises related to a reading text and interactive reading activities**

Common exercises related to reading texts include but are not limited to prediction, fill-in-the-blanks, true/false statements, vocabulary exercises, comprehension questions, grammar exercises, summary activities, and discussion questions. These types of exercises can be valuable learning tools that can make a text more accessible to learners. However, these kinds of exercises do not necessarily provide the kind of interaction and practice students need to develop their spoken language skills (Rivers, 1981). Interactive reading activities are not meant as a replacement for the kinds of exercises we usually see with a reading text; rather, interactive reading activities are a means of using reading texts to practice reading-based skills, such as summarizing, skimming, and scanning through student-student interaction, i.e. oral communication. These activities can be used with or without common reading exercises. For example, students might do the "reading half a text" exercise as a means of practicing prediction and skimming skills. Afterwards, they might be given exercises that focus on vocabulary, comprehension, specific grammar points, etc.

### **Interactive Reading Activities**

**Skill practiced:** All activities below are meant to incorporate oral communicative skills which by necessity include speaking and listening. Some activities also include a writing component. Some of the activities include all four main skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Activities might be adapted to include additional practice with other skills relevant to instructional objectives and curricular needs. For instance, after completing the jigsaw reading activity, students might be asked to provide a written summary of the text used in the activity. Some activities also practice other reading skills, such as skimming, scanning, or summarizing. Each instructor should use and adapt activities according to their teaching context and students' needs.

**Choosing appropriate texts:** The activities below can easily be used with whatever reading texts are used in the classroom – whether they are texts from course books, authentic texts, or other texts created for language learning. However, text length should be considered. Most of the activities below make use of short texts or parts of a text. Of course, instructors will also want to – to the extent possible – choose texts that engage and interest students.

Texts that students find boring or tedious will be less likely to be retained in the memory or to spark interest in conversation. However, most of these activities can be used even in situations where the teacher is required to strictly adhere to using certain reading passages, and can spice up a required reading that students might find dull. For instance, public school instructors in the Ivory Coast complain about having to teach a reading passage about Queen Elizabeth since this sort of reading is far removed from the students' current life situation in time and distance. However, using an activity such as "reading race" with such a reading could strongly motivate students to find the pertinent information in the article – to read the text without the tedium often associated with such required readings.

The activities listed below can be used with different levels of proficiency. Instructors simply need to choose level-appropriate texts; for instance, for the story strips activity, the instructor would choose a simple text – possibly all in the present tense and with only a few discourse markers – for beginners; and a more complex task – with tenses acquired at higher levels of proficiency and more and varied discourse makers – for advanced learners. While these activities can be adapted to different levels of proficiency, they all require a basic level of reading ability and so are not suitable for absolute beginners. Some activities require more facility with English, such as *Read, Tell, Listen, Tell*, and so are better suited for intermediate or advanced students.

It is important to note, too, that while fine literature is important to character and intellectual development, authentic literary passages may not be the most suitable choices for interactive reading activities. For instance, it would be fairly useless to have basic students try to interact with one another using passages from Chaucer or Shakespeare. As Papalia says, "If students are to acquire fluency in reading ..., they need to be enticed to read materials for the same natural purposes as they read in their native language – for following instructions or recipes; for understanding headlines, news items, short plays, and so on, before being introduced to what are considered masterworks of the literary heritage" (Papalia as cited in Rivers, 1987, 75).

**Disclaimer:** There are many activities that are common staples in the world of English language teaching such as *Find Someone Who* or *Bingo*. Likewise, jigsaw reading activities typically have a degree of familiarity amongst ESL/EFL instructors. Some of the activities below I have learned from other ELT professionals I have worked with. I have duly given credit to those individuals. Where I have acquired the idea from a book, I have cited the source. The descriptions of the activities below, however, are mine.

### **Reading Half a Text** (from Sara Denne-Bolton)

**Skill practiced:** skimming, prediction

**Materials:** A paragraph, story, or article, no longer than one page

All students will work with the same text. One copy is needed for each student. Fold the text in half vertically. Place the right side of the page face up. Give each student a copy of the text, making sure that they do not turn it over. Have students skim the text. Then ask yes/no questions and open-ended questions to get students to make predictions about the

content of the text. Predictions can be written on the board. Once students have finished their predictions, have them unfold their papers and read the entire text. Compare predictions with the actual content of the text. This activity helps students understand that they can gather a great deal of meaning from a text without reading every word of a text.

**Read, Question, Answer, Check** (from Shahid Islam Khan)

**Materials:** Two different paragraphs or short passages

**Skills practiced:** comprehension, question-formation, evaluation skills, giving feedback

Put students into groups of four. Then divide each four into pairs. One pair is A, and the other pair is B. Give each pair a text. A has one text and B has a different one.

Have each pair read their paragraph together and write two comprehension questions about the text (more advanced students can be asked to write more than two questions). Once the questions have been written, have A and B switch papers. Now, A must read the text it has been given from B and write answers to the questions. B reads the text it got from A and answers the questions. Once the questions have been answered, the texts are returned to the original owners. Each pair checks the other pair's answers to see if the questions have been answered satisfactorily and gives feedback to the other pair.

**Variation:** Students all read the same text. Students work in pairs or groups to write questions about the text. Each pair or group then asks their questions to another pair or group to check comprehension (Rivers, 1987).

### Story strips

**Materials:** A text with enough sequencing clues that make it possible for a re-arranged story to be put in order.

**Skill practiced:** Sequencing, textual cohesion

Type out the story so that there is one sentence per line. Cut each story into strips so that there is only one sentence per strip. For each set, mix up the strips so that the sentences are in random order. Put students into pairs or groups. Give each pair or group a set of strips. Have students put the story in the correct order. When students have finished, the instructor can check and give approval or suggestions for change, or groups that finish early can check other groups' work. Finally, check for comprehension. As a follow-up activity, students can write their own story in the same genre as the strip story. For example, if the original story was a fable using animals, students can create their own stories with animal characters and a moral.

**Variation 1:** Have students put the lines from a dialogue in the correct order.

**Variation 2:** Have students put paragraphs from a story or article in the correct order.

**Read, Tell, Listen, and Write** (from *World Link*, level 2)

**Materials:** Two very short stories (about one paragraph in length)

**Skills practiced:** comprehension, summarizing, re-telling, memory re-call, speculation

Put students in pairs. One student is A and the other is B. A and B have different stories. Students read their stories to themselves. After reading, all students turn their stories over

or put them in a place where they cannot see them. Then, A tells B about their story while B listens and takes notes on guided questions, such as: 1. Who is the story about? 2. What happened? B then tells their story while A takes notes on the same questions. As a follow-up, you can have students discuss what might happen next in the stories.

**Read, Tell, Listen, and Tell** (from Sara Denne-Bolton)

**Skills practiced:** comprehension, summarizing, re-telling, memory re-call, clarification checks

**Materials:** Four different stories (should not be too long) or paragraphs

Put students into groups of four and name each student A, B, C, and D. Give each student a different text. Then put A and B together, and C and D together. All students read their texts silently. After reading, all students put their stories in a place where they cannot see them. Then A explains their story to B while B listens carefully, and C explains their story carefully while D listens. A and B and C and D switch roles and the process is repeated. A and B then come together with C and D. A tells the story heard from B to the entire group. B should listen carefully and make any necessary corrections. B tells the story heard from A to the entire group while A offers any needed corrections. C then tells D's story to the group, and D tells C's story with C and D both offering any necessary corrections.

**Jigsaw**

**Materials:** An article or story

**Skills practiced:** comprehension, summarizing, re-telling, memory re-call, collaboration

Cut up a text into equal parts so that each member of a group has one part of the text. For example, if students are in groups of three, there will be part A, part B, and part C. Each member reads their part silently without sharing information with group members. Then, students move to another group that has the same part: A's will be with A's, B's will be with B's, and so on. In their new groups, students work together to understand their section and make a summary of it. Students return to their original groups and give their summaries to recreate the text. As a follow-up, comprehension or discussion questions can be given.

**Variation:** A text is split in two. Students work in pairs. Students ask their partner questions to find out what is in their text. For lower-level students, the questions can be given.

**Reading Race** (from *Learning and Teaching English* by Cora Lindsay with Paul Knight)

**Materials:** Any text suitable to students' level of English

**Skill practiced:** Scanning

Make comprehension questions based on a text. You will need one set of questions per group.

Write each question on a strip of paper, for example:

What two events united the colonists against Britain?

Pass out one copy of the text to each group. One member of each group comes to you to get the first question and then returns to their group with the question. Together, the group finds the answer and writes it on the paper strip. The paper strip is then returned to you by another

member of the group. If the answer is correct, give the group member the next question. If the answer is incorrect, ask the group member to return to the group and try again. The first team to answer all the questions wins.

### Conclusion

While most English teachers are accustomed to working with reading texts in their classes, they might be very much inclined to teach reading texts in a rather traditional manner. While there is certainly a place for use of traditional exercises in a reading class, such exercises alone are unlikely to offer sufficient practice in helping students develop the language skills they need to be proficient users of English. Interactive reading activities can provide learners with the kind of interaction they need to develop language proficiency as well as other important development skills. Interactive reading activities can also be a way to get students more interested in and engaged with reading passages, especially passages they might be required but reluctant to read.

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