Reading from Online Sources: Strategies for Young Learners

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Abstract

Reading is an important aspect in the process of language learning. There are several sources of reading materials like books, magazines, newspapers, brochures, etc. Along with these, there is an influx of online reading sources today. Information is being disseminated through these sources and several aspects of our lives too seem to be influenced and dominated by these sources. As far as an English language teacher is concerned, the young learners of today seem to be giving a lot of importance to these online sources. There are various sources and different types of materials that the language teacher can use to train learners to acquire effective language skills in English. Why not look at the use of online materials as a stimulating avenue for language learning? That is what this paper attempts to do. The paper also suggests a few strategies for reading effectively from online sources.

Key words: Reading, online sources, hypertext, Internet, strategies

Reading Skills

There are multiple skills involved in the process of reading. Readers must use background knowledge, as well as their past knowledge and relate these to the new materials they're reading. They must also have an accurate knowledge of the meanings of words they're reading. Along with this, they must access their knowledge of grammar and the ability to pronounce words completely and correctly. All these factors are integral elements of the reading process through which the reader is able to make proper sense of the reading material.

Reading Materials

The reading materials that we choose go a very long way in influencing the motivational levels of learners. The materials should evoke interest in the learner to read. It is this interest that

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increases motivation. The materials should not only create interest, they should be readily available and they should be at the appropriate linguistic level. If there is a wide variety of materials that range from easy to difficult, learners can select materials that they find easy as well as challenging.

Reading Specific Materials

Another significant factor here is the need or requirement of a learner to read a particular material. If a learner has to read something only because the formal structure of the language has to be learnt from this exercise (as often happens in the ESL classroom), then it looks as though our learner has no need to use the language outside the classroom. The only function of reading then is—to learn reading. According to Christine Nuttal, for reading to become more effective, there should be authentic reasons for reading, i.e. "reasons that are not concerned with language learning but with uses to which we put reading in our daily lives outside the classroom." (Nuttal, 1987, p. 3) While choosing books/materials to inculcate a healthy habit of reading, she also talks about how to make these appealing to readers so that they genuinely want to read these: "They must appeal to the intended readers, supplying what they really want. The appeal is greater if the book is attractive in appearance, well printed and with good coloured illustrations—more illustrations and bigger print for more elementary students. The books should look like the books we buy from choice: i.e. they should not smell of the schoolroom; notes and questions are better omitted." (Nuttal, 1987, p. 171)

Reasons for Choosing Online Materials

An important reason teachers often cite for choosing online materials is the belief that such materials won't require any extra motivation for learners as the Internet is a fascinating world, especially for students. As Nuttal argues, it is an appealing source of reading. To a very large extent this is true too, for the Internet has gained tremendous importance as an avenue for locating information, acquiring knowledge as well as for entertainment purposes. The aptitude to locate, read and comprehend information on the Internet has become a prerequisite to gauge an individual's educational and professional capabilities. In other words, it is not sufficient to be literate anymore; rather one should be web literate. Today several online platforms have become part and parcel of our lives. These include sites like Facebook, Twitter, Google Docs, Wikipedia,

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LinkedIn, to name a few, which are all spaces that promote shared reading, writing and communication. The Internet has widened the concept of 'audience' and 'learning community' beyond the classroom walls to a global online network. And here, a learner's skills in assessing, evaluating, synthesizing and communicating information in a proper manner have become vital for active participation.

Technology Savvy Individuals and Age Groups

There is a general notion that youngsters today know a lot deal more about technology than adults. This is true too, for they seem to be adept at trouble shooting computers, listening to music, playing games, sending and receiving e-mails, and chatting on Facebook while simultaneously watching television and studying for the next day's class test. Talk about multitasking! They seem to be remarkable at this. However, studies have shown that the skills youngsters employ with regard to their use of the Internet (which incidentally also include some skills of reading) are limited to skimming, scanning, browsing and selecting. These skills may be sufficient for a casual use of the Internet, or even for entertainment purposes, but they're definitely not sufficient for research or study purposes.

The Internet and the Printed Text

The Internet is a complex as well as complicated space. The reading material that is available in this space is called a hypertext. This is also a text, "the physical manifestation of language, the data the reader works with to construct meaning" (Wallace, 1992, p.8). A hypertext is a computer based text that can be read on the screen. This very screen brings in a major difference between a hypertext and a traditional print text. An online reader who reads the text on a computer screen can see less of the text at a given time in a restricted area. But while reading a book or magazine, we often read from top to bottom and front to back. So it is difficult to set the boundaries of a hypertext, as a page or image may exist in several places since it is linked in several places.

The printed text also follows the principle of linearity. It is sequential and progresses from line to line, paragraph to paragraph and from page to page in a linear fashion. The hypertext on the other hand is non-linear, i.e. there is no strict prescription so as to read it in a specific

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manner. In the book, *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and The History of Writing*, Bolter (1991) argues that the hypertext can be read in a multidirectional manner with the reader having multiple options to choose among various available sub-topics and links. The various inherent features of a hypertext allow readers to pave their own paths through multiple sources in a non-linear manner. They can directly interact with the text, locate the specific information they want to access and read in a manner that is meaningful to them.

Non-Linear Texts

While giving the reader more alternatives, the non-linear aspect of a hypertext also places a greater cognitive responsibility on the reader. Here she must always keep track of her position in the online space, as also the links she has clicked. She must also have a good sense of where to go next, skip or explore further links and information and at the same time monitor web pages previously visited. If the reader is not careful here, the choices and multiple paths that a hypertext allows and which gives the online reader great freedom to navigate can also lead to a sense of discontinuity while processing information.

Beyond the Reader's Control

The massive amount of information available can be intimidating. While reading an online material, often a reader is unaware as to whether there are innumerable screens to read or just a few. This can lead to frustration, anxiety and uncertainty with regard to time management. Screen glare, screen size and screen resolution also have an impact on reading. The same is the case with factors associated with web pages like page design, use of irregular fonts, lack of contrast between the text and the background and the use of background patterns.

There is no doubt that some of these factors are not in the hands of the reader. Perhaps issues related to screen glare can be solved if one has a reader friendly LED screen. But what if one has to read on a computer in a lab or a browsing centre? Likewise what can a reader do about the way a web page is designed? Very little, indeed. But as online reading has become almost an inevitable part of a learner's life in this present age, a few comprehension strategies about online reading will be of aid to them. In this regard, we often find researchers using the terms reading strategy and reading skill interchangeably. What is a reading skill and what is a reading strategy?

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It is argued that a behavior in which readers are effortlessly engaged in, especially without the purposeful reclamation of that behavior is termed a skill. A skill is thus a habit or a response that has been developed to a level of automaticity and which comes habitually to a learner. A strategy on the other hand is something that a reader must summon in order to progress through a text and engage in understanding the meaning. So while a skill is effortless, a strategy is purposeful and requires effort. (Alexander and Jetton, 2000) In an ideal reader, we can hope that a strategy may eventually evolve into a skill. But one question that is yet to have a definitive and conclusive answer is whether strategies often found effectual with regard to reading print materials can be applied to online sources. While some researchers feel that print reading strategies can be applied to online reading, others feel that print reading strategies won't work in an online environment mainly because of the change in medium.

Print Reading Strategies for Online Reading

I personally feel that a few print reading strategies can be used for online reading, with some minor modifications. And especially for our intermediate level readers today, these strategies will be beneficial because they took their first baby steps in the field of reading by using print materials. So they already have some skill sets with regard to print reading. It will be less tedious to transfer these to the online medium. But I really don't know if these strategies will work for a child born today, and who may start reading tomorrow in an online milieu! So before looking at online reading strategies, let us first glance at print reading strategies employed by effective readers.

Such readers often bring a lot of prior knowledge or schema to their reading of a text. Based on this prior knowledge, they make predictions about the content of the text. As they read they revise these predictions and make new ones. They're 'selectively attentive' while reading, i.e. they go fast while reading known information and read at a slower pace when they come across new, important or complex information. They also constantly evaluate whether they comprehend the text and whether the text is meeting their expectations. If they find that comprehension has broken down, they employ other strategies like for example, re-reading to overcome this problem. They paraphrase and summarize what they're reading especially while dealing with lengthy and complicated texts. They frequently ask themselves questions, imagine

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pictures of the content in their minds and often form a wide range of inferences that are based broadly yet astutely on their schema. In short, we see that even as a good reader is involved in reading a text, several things are simultaneously happening in his mind, much of which is highly strategic by nature and all of which show an active involvement and engagement of the reader with the text (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995). All these are of course with reference to efficient readers. Inactive readers on the other hand take a passive approach to reading in general, be it in the first or second language. Such readers do not identify important points or ideas. They do not evaluate their comprehension or employ strategies to cope with situations where reading becomes difficult. They also bring less prior knowledge to their reading process and are often uncritical of the text/material in hand. But let us assume that our intermediate level readers are efficient readers and move on to online reading strategies. Those chosen here have been modified from the book *Reading the Web: Strategies for Internet Inquiry* by Maya Eagleton and Elizabeth Dobler (2007). These are, as mentioned earlier, related to print reading strategies.

List of Strategies

1. Initiating Prior Knowledge: Prior knowledge or schema is generally used by effective readers to verify whether their construction of meaning matches what they know about the topic and the structure of the text. They do this by making connections between the text and themselves, the text and other texts and also between the text and the world at large. These connections help them link new information with what is already known. Readers of online sources must also rely on prior knowledge to form connections. Most importantly their prior knowledge and experience of using the Internet and navigating websites and search engines will go a long way in making them effective online readers. Learners without this prior knowledge often struggle on the Web. They make random choices while using websites and often find themselves getting lost in a stockpile of information. Thus it is not enough if a reader has strong prior knowledge of the topic. Prior knowledge with regard to using search engines and websites also become leading criteria to becoming good online readers.

2. Predicting: As far as reading is concerned, predicting may be defined as a kind of inference in which readers use their prior knowledge to make an informed and intelligent guess about what will come next. Many effective readers make predictions before, during and after

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reading. This is done by combining prior knowledge with a reader's experiences with similar texts and a sense of curiosity with regard to what the particular text contains. As a strategy, predicting involves three steps—making an informed guess, collecting information to verify the prediction and then making a judgment based on the accuracy of the prediction. This predicting strategy can be found among web users too. But here readers go one step ahead and make predictions not only with regard to the content of the webpage they're reading, but they also make predictions with regard to how to move about the text in order to find information. For example, when a reader clicks on a link, she is predicting that the particular link is going to lead her to a specific kind of information. Making predictions and verifying them is an important aspect of web reading. Clicking links randomly without an intelligent and informed mode of predicting may create variety in browsing, but while seeking a specific set of information, this can lead to waste of time and can prove to be a frustrating experience.

3. <u>Understanding Key Ideas</u>: Good readers are able to identify the important points in a text on which to focus attention, while leaving out unimportant details that deserve little attention. Before reading, the reader might make predictions based on the title of the text which are then verified during the actual reading of the text. Several features like titles, sub-headings, captions, etc provide clues to the reader about what is important. The reader combines the main points in the text into one central argument or several key ideas. What a particular reader considers important will depend on her purpose of reading. Nevertheless, the process of identifying key ideas is vital while reading informational texts. Identifying key ideas while reading an online source is similar to the process mentioned for reading print materials. Features like headings, sub-headings, captions, etc are present on web pages too. But along with these, there are other features like icons, hyperlinks, interactive graphics, different colours used for highlighting, etc. In addition, you also have features that can be distracting like pop-ups and banners that are inherently present to attract the reader's attention. All these features along with the web text can create a feeling of being overwhelmed which in turn may make it disconcerting to a reader to actually determine what is important and what is frivolous. Experienced online readers rely on prior knowledge to identify which visuals are distracting and which provide useful information. Thus there is an overlapping of the strategies of initiating prior knowledge and identifying key ideas.

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4. <u>Synthesizing</u>: This strategy requires readers to combine their awareness of the reading process with an understanding of the text. Readers often stop and summarize by thinking about what is being read and how the information acquired augments their understanding and supports the construction of meaning. In fact experienced readers not only summarize ideas from a single text but also between texts in order to synthesize ideas that broaden their overall understanding. A reader's comprehension of ideas may lead to a change in her thinking, thereby eventually paving the way to the formation of new perspectives. The synthesis of online texts also gives an opportunity to formulate new ideas, which are gathered from a webpage or from multiple web pages. Ever so often, the reader must identify the important ideas and make a note of these as she navigates within a website as well as between websites. As one gains experience in reading from the Internet, one will learn that specific sets of information or the answer to a particular question will not come from one website or from within one section of a website. Rather, the answer will often require the synthesizing of ideas from different locations and from different online sources.

5. <u>Monitoring</u>: As readers we know that we often devote more time towards difficult sections of a text. Strong readers often summarize large portions of the text during and after reading to monitor their reading process and ability in meaning making. In fact such readers have a very good sense of their understanding or lack of understanding. They use other skills like skimming by initially glancing over the text to know the topic as well as the type of text to see if these are related to their purpose of reading. Scanning is used to extract specific information from sub-headings, italicized words, dates, numbers or other details that stand out for a specific reader. Careful reading is done at a slow pace to note, understand and remember details. So an efficient reader uses a variety of skills to monitor whether she is able to actively participate in the meaning making process. Readers of web pages must also monitor their comprehension of ideas throughout their reading by using the above mentioned skills and at the same time understanding that the information on a webpage may be hidden beneath layers of links. For example, the homepage of a website may contain the information you are seeking, but the specific information that you're searching for may be obtained only after navigating several links. Therefore, the monitoring done while reading an online source, is definitely more complex. Here the reader is not just checking whether the text makes sense or not; rather he is exploring through layers of texts to find the required information.

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6. <u>Repairing</u>: This strategy is concerned with what readers do when they know that the meaning has been lost. Instead of continuing with the reading process in such situations, effective readers anticipate problems and take measures to solve these. They use other 'fix-up' techniques to repair the damage. These include re-reading, skipping ahead or searching for context clues to understand the meaning. When we understand the text and when the meaning flows smoothly, we rarely think about how comprehension is actually taking place. But when we lose track of the ideas in a text, we often shift into a metacognitive mode so as to summon effective strategies to understand the text. Internet readers too re-read to gain meaning or scan a webpage in search of context clues. To use the required 'fix-up' strategies, online readers must be efficient in navigating within and between texts. For example, a reader who wants to re-read a text must know how to get back to the particular webpage. Should he use the back button or follow the links back to the page or would it be better to find the webpage in the history list. There are several ways to get back to the same webpage, but some paths are more efficient than others. This knowledge will come with experience in handling the web.

Strategies Help Thought Processes

The strategies used by effective readers regardless of whether they're reading printed materials or from the web represent a cross-section of these habits and thought processes necessary for making meaning from a text. Often these strategies are used simultaneously, as we may ask a question, make a prediction, monitor our comprehension and repair it all within a few seconds. The crux of the matter is that in today's age, the Internet has become an important source of information and in essence, knowledge. Learners must be prepared to read online materials, which is definitely a more complex activity than reading print materials. Only through reading can a learner make use of good strategies and eventually convert these strategies into skills so that there is a strong sense of automaticity in her reading. This will eventually enable learners to become effective and efficient readers.

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