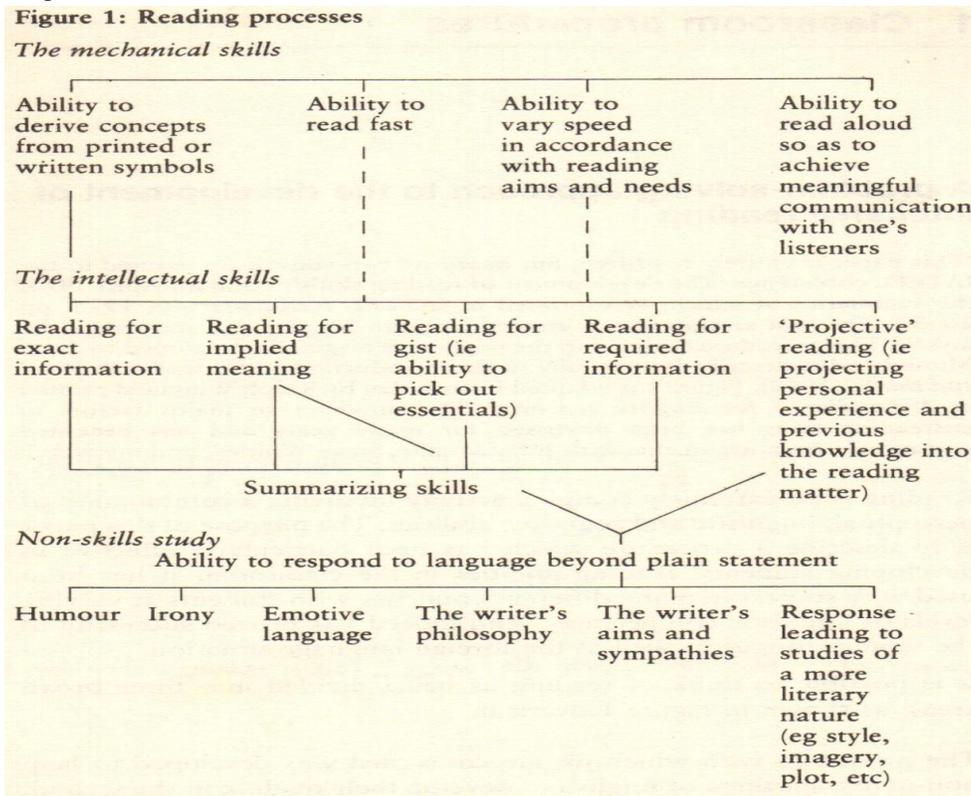




## A Problem- Solving Approach to The Development of Intensive Reading

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Reading is an extremely complex activity involving a combination of perceptual, linguistic and cognitive abilities. The purpose of this paper is to describe a procedure which has been particularly effective in developing students’ reading abilities in the classroom. It has been used with success in many different countries with students at varying levels of linguistic competence- and indeed has proved successful in the mother tongue as well as the foreign language situation. It is possible to think of reading as being divided into three broad areas, as shown in Figure I.



The procedure with which we are concerned was developed to help non-native speakers of English to develop their reading in the second, and to a smaller extent to the third, area in the diagram. It is basically a very simple procedure in which the class is divided into groups of three to five students to discuss and reach agreed answers to questions which are asked on fairly short texts. However, for the technique to work as effectively as possible the questions must be very carefully constructed and the teacher must interact with the group discussion with a sensitivity which can only be acquired with care and practice. First, it is important that the questions should be designed *to train* rather than *test reading* response. It is not satisfactory for a question simply to indicate whether a student has understood a particular text; the process of answering it must help him to develop abilities which will be used in subsequent reading. Any school reading programme will therefore have to help the student to be able to read fast when he needs to, to skim, to look for required information, and so on- and also to be able to examine a complicated text when necessary and understand it as fully as possible. Intensive reading exercises aim to develop this last ability.

Since intensive reading is an exercise in extracting maximum meaning from a text, the teacher cannot set about training this unless he is able to specify systematically what the potential sources of misunderstanding. This means that a categorization of types of question, and a classification of the main causes of comprehension error, or misreading, is necessary. Each area of potential difficulty can be treated as a 'problem' to be solved. The teacher's task is to set up situations which require pupil to work on the various types of problem area in relation to world wide variety of appropriate texts. Put like this the approach sounds rather dry, but in practice students always enjoy this approach because the discussion of answers, if the questions are well set, is invariably exciting.

Group discussion of comprehension is possible with any sort of question, but there are good pedagogic grounds for using multiple choice questions for a substantial part of this work. The main advantage of multiple choice is that it limits the range of the discussion. While it is true that understanding a text does not consist simply of decoding an exact and unambiguous message, there is still a limited degree of tolerance allowable for any particular text—some interpretations will not be possible and students have to develop the ability to recognize how much flexibility is appropriate for any particular type of text. Through well set questions the teacher or text-writer can guide the discussion so that temptations to misread are resisted and the process of understanding and interpretation is explored by the students themselves, who are free to determine themselves the precise level of sophistication of their response. It is very difficult to classify the major causes of misreading, and the list which follows can only be tentative. Nonetheless, it does cover the major areas which have been found helpful in designing materials using this procedure.

### **1. Misunderstanding at the specific level:**

#### **(a) Normal sense**

- (i) Misunderstanding the basic grammatical systems of English, eg tenses ( the significance of had), modifying words (too), etc
- (ii) Misunderstanding the normal use of lexical items in combination(confusing neglect and ignore, run+out,etc)
- (iii) Misunderstanding orthographic signals (non-defining relative clauses marked with commas, our 'great' leader, etc)

**(b) Special effects**

- (i) Misunderstanding metaphorical usage or figures of speech ( the car ploughed through the crowd, etc)
- (ii) Misunderstanding the author's thematic choice (Never had he... v. He had never. . . etc)
- (iii) Misunderstanding specific cultural references (the symbols significance of Big Ben, the historical Significance of important dates, eg 1917,1776, etc)

**2. Misunderstanding at a rhetorical or discourse level:**

- (i) failing to recognize the main point of passage.
- (ii) failing to follow the links between parts of a passage ( seeing that one paragraph illustrates a point made in the previous one; recognizing the significance of nevertheless, however, etc)

**3. Misunderstanding at a pragmatic level:**

- (i) responding to a passage in terms of an inappropriate cultural set(introducing one's own cultural assumptions, eg about the value of particular attitudes, the social significance of particular events; reading more into the text than it is intended to hold, etc).

In well set multiple-choice questions it will be possible to specify exactly what must be understood in order to recognize the best answer, and exactly what sort of misunderstanding will lead to acceptance of a distracting alternative. The teacher will then be able to guide the discussion, if students have not been able to do this themselves, towards a full understanding of the question in relation to the passage, and systematic elimination of tempting misreading.

The teacher, then, must select his passage according to its appropriateness in subject matter, while the difficulty of questions in relation to the difficulty of questions the text must lead to a balance which is suitable in level to intellectual, cultural, syntactic and lexical competence of the class. Decisions about how to introduce the material, whether to read it to the class before or after asking them to read it silently, or whether simply to present it to the for silent reading, are dependent on the known level of the class relation to the material—these strategies are various ways of grading the initial contact of the pupils with the passage. The eventual aim, however, is for the class to be able to extract the maximum meaning from it. This means that the student must feel that he is reading the text purposefully, for meaning is dependent on a purposeful interaction between reader and text. However, in the classroom context, and particularly when intellectual skills are involved, the “game” element in decoding a text prepared at an appropriate level of subtlety provides plenty of motivation. Both Native and non-native speakers find themselves solving a stimulating puzzle with a high degree of commitment. The puzzle is produced by the tension between the question and the text, and the

text is simply a setting, a context for the exploration of the subtleties of language. For this reason the quality of the text as a piece of writing is relatively unimportant, as long as it is fairly typical of writing which students may expect to read, and as long as the subject matter holds some interest to the students. Questioned may of course be set on the whole passage—indeed some of the most interesting discussions i have seen have been based on a comparison of four different summaries of the text, or of four different interpretations of the symbolism in a literary extract—but they need not be, and it is not the intention of this procedure to enable students to understand a particular text. Rather it is to use a text as a basis for discussion which will train abilities which will be necessary for students in reading texts of similar kinds on their own. In Short, it is a stimulating pedagogic device.

The Standard lesson will ask students to fallow their individual reading with individual work on the questions until each one has opted for an answer to each question. This may of course be done at home before the lesson starts. At this point students will work in groups, ideally of not more than five, trying to arrive at a common group answer to each question. With multiple-choice questions this will simply be a matter of choice; with free response questions discussion will have to produce as successful as possible a wording to be agreed on. It is at this stage, anyway, that the most effective training takes place. The process of group discussion encourages active participation by students, usually in English, in which the answer to questions must be justified by reference to specific points in the text. The teacher is able to go round the groups promoting and if necessary directing the discussion, and forcing students to demolish the claims of each of the distracters. Finally, time may be spent in class discussion, when the groups are brought together, and representative argues their cases, if necessary against those of other groups who differ in their answers.

This basic structure i capable of considerable adaptation and variation. Groups, pairs and individuals can be used at various stages of the process, and questioning techniques can be adapted to the sophistication of the class. Students can, for example, be asked to establish an order of priority of a number of possible answers, or can construct the best one-sentence justification for the rejection of each distracter and the acceptance of each correct answer. Above all, it forces the teacher to measure the material used against the ability of the class throughout the teaching process. Thus the class becomes extremely enjoyable for both teacher and pupil.

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