

# How to Improve and Enhance Reading Skills

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## 1. Introduction

The following essay aims to outline a practical approach to reading skills and reflect on strategies and to reflect on strategies that may be developed and tools that may be resorted to in order to improve and enhance these skills.

I would like to share my experience as a student and as a tutor so as to give a unique overview of this topic; especially considering the difficulties and challenges the students face when they have to deal with different types of texts and sources as part of their studies or daily work.

There is no pretense of giving an explanation based on scientific analysis. On the contrary, this description is intended to be provided on a practical basis.

What is depicted here is an everyday experience of studying, teaching, and developing strategies to tackle difficulties and to profit from coping with these challenges successfully.

## 2. Setting the context: Students' profiles and academic background

Reading skills pose a challenge for autonomous learning. It has become a demand in the academic and business worlds, as students need to develop strategies to combine their background knowledge with the unknown field of a foreign language.

It is the teacher's aim to raise awareness of the need to be good at reading, in order to be able to play a leading role as a professional in

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diverse fields in today's global context, as well as to generate ideas and provide useful tools to excel at this skill.

As a starting point, there will be a brief description of the typical student who has this basic need, and both the setting and the target will be outlined.

On the one hand, I can refer to university students who have to learn reading comprehension strategies to show their abilities to read academic texts in English and answer questions in Spanish. They need to improve their knowledge of English and sit for exams. These are students at local colleges in which English is a compulsory subject for all courses of studies. The main objective of these subjects is reading comprehension.

This is a specific profile, in the sense that these students have different levels of English and academic backgrounds. The texts we work with are in English, whereas explanations in class and written activities are in Spanish.

Such classes do not consist of either translation, drafting, interpreting or giving opinions on a topic. Their purpose is merely to help students understand the paragraph, find main ideas and answer very concrete questions.

On the other hand, I can refer to students on international programmes at foreign universities who need to develop their reading skills more thoroughly, taking into account that both materials and exams are in English. At the same time, they have to develop their writing skills as they have to answer essay questions or problem questions. Their starting point is a higher level of English but still "General English", not "Academic English".

These students have to be trained in order to learn how to discuss or critically assess a specific topic. It is never "all you know about this issue." They have to succeed in elaborating their answers, it has to be a "new product" in which their opinions are included, and ideas are clearly developed and connected.

Finally, I would like to widen the focus to a third type of student who needs to use English as part of his or her professional life. In this particular case, the student is a businessman or professional such as a doctor, a lawyer or an engineer, who reads a lot in English but has to combine this skill with others. He or she is used to writing emails, memos or papers and not having much time to think of the reply, that is to say, this student has to make decisions which cannot wait.

However, professional students do not want to make mistakes and most of the time, they are on their own. As for their academic background, they have a working knowledge of English, since they know internal processes and technical vocabulary. In this case, reading is the starting point for other skills, e.g. listening or face-to-face speaking. In addition to this, they prepare for these instances (meetings, conference calls, their own career resumes) beforehand in writing. It is very important for them to become independent as their promotion and success depend on this qualification. Learning English plays the role of an external source of motivation, as they are under a lot of pressure to improve and excel at it.

These students have to learn how to apply formulas, how to use a framework they can apply to different scenarios.

All these students have a common ground which can be outlined as follows:

- Knowledge of English, as they have had some basic training in the foreign language, usually aimed at communication in everyday life.
- Technical vocabulary in their mother tongue (i.e. Spanish).
- They have already developed and found tools they make use of when reading in their native language.

Taking into account these different profiles, I will move on to explain how teachers can profit from this background knowledge as a spring board to achieve improvement in students' reading skills.

### **3. Teaching and learning objectives:**

Teachers can contribute to narrowing the gap and building a bridge between students' background knowledge and their desired target: to become independent learners who can deal with English sources for academic purposes or for business.

Firstly, teachers have to be well aware of students' needs. As obvious as it may seem, their paramount need is to understand.

Secondly, students have recourse to useful tools they have probably made use of before in their mother tongue and develop strategies they can handle properly, but in the foreign language.

Thirdly, students have to be able to identify the main structures, rules and mechanisms of English. In my opinion, identifying is fundamental as there is no other way of teaching grammar in this sort of context.

Finally, teachers have to provide students with strategies to simplify language, that is to say, to be able to grasp the overall meaning as well as to focus on relevant ideas.

#### 4. Difficulties which can be found

Due to the contrasting features of both languages, certain drawbacks arise. Just to mention a few difficulties students can encounter, it is important firstly to highlight register. There is a gap between informal everyday English and academic or formal English. For example, the word “bargain” is a formal legal word which can be found in the field of contracts whereas in everyday English “bargain” is a term which is used to refer to a special offer.

**bargain**<sup>1</sup> /BrE 'bɑ:gən; NAmE 'bɑ:rgən/ **noun** an agreement between two or more people or groups, to do sth for each other: *These two people never intended to make a bargain which could be enforced in law.*

In general English, a bargain is something that is bought for less than the normal price: *Investors have been able to snap up companies at bargain prices* (Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English, 2014).

Another aspect of English which can be confusing is word order. For example, the phrase “political power” means “*poder político*” though it is often translated as “*política del poder*” because students tend to follow the order they are familiar with. In other words, they think of the word order in Spanish, rather than in English.

In addition, certain categories can pose difficulty. For instance, in the case of noun phrases, they appear to be complex to manage as students often find it hard to find the nucleus. Therefore, they try to say something that makes sense in Spanish irrespective of what the text actually refers to.

Another feature that is sometimes difficult to assimilate is the meaning of certain words through context, such as “party”, as they know the meaning in everyday language (*fiesta*) and they do not consider that together with “political” it means “*partido político*”.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that certain grammar patterns which can be more widely used in academic or formal English than in Informal English, can also be considered a difficulty. Among these structures, passive voice, modal verbs, the use of subjunctive mood in English, as well as the different uses of gerund or the “-ing” form, can be considered hard to learn.

## **5. Developing an approach to success**

I have outlined students' profiles as well as their academic background and posed some difficulties which may be encountered.

The key aspect is to find a way to turn these difficulties into opportunities to learn.

An approach that has proved to be successful involves avoiding teaching grammar in the traditional way, on the grounds of lack of time or need. The important issue in this case is to raise awareness of certain features of grammar in English. Students have to be exposed to different types of texts. In addition, they have to read different examples, to consider the context, and to reflect upon the frequency and reason for using a specific pattern and not others.

Moreover, by avoiding mere literal translation, it is possible to make students understand that they have to aim at developing strategies to improve their overall reading comprehension ability by resorting to the context itself, their knowledge of both languages and the ideas they have regarding the topic, too.

As mentioned before, the starting point is students' background knowledge and they should connect it to new knowledge. Students should be engaged in active participation in class.

By using scanning and skimming as reading strategies, students should play an active role in their learning process so as not to lose sight of their main goal, which is to research tools to achieve a higher degree of autonomy.

Teachers should foster prediction of content, of possible outcome. Also, they should encourage students to learn how to paraphrase, and how to apply their specific technical knowledge to the specific text.

Inductive and deductive reasoning has to be implemented to enhance their reading skills.

In the final stage of this approach, it is essential to allocate some time to reflection upon students' own work.

## **6. Suggested activities**

Strategies and activities which can be used in class will be displayed so that students can improve their research skills (either by using dictionaries, search engines, or the context itself) as well as learning how to identify

structures and features of English (such as grammar patterns, word order, word categories) to achieve comprehension of reading sources.

The following examples are included to illustrate how this approach can be developed, how theory and practice are intertwined, and how effective these simple activities can turn out to be in the course of the teaching-learning process:

### First example

1.- Lee el siguiente texto:

**How Media Censorship Affects the News You See**  
([www.thebalance.com](http://www.thebalance.com))

By Glenn Halbrooks Updated April 13, 2017

Media censorship takes many forms that affect the way you get your news. While news stories are often edited for length, designed to keep some information from becoming public. Sometimes these decisions are made to safeguard a person's privacy, others to protect media outlets from corporate or political fallout.

2.- Responde las siguientes preguntas:

- 1) La censura de los medios, ¿tiene una sola forma respecto al modo en que recibís las noticias?
- 2) ¿Para qué están diseñadas muchas opciones que se toman al editar noticias?
- 3) Estas decisiones que se toman, ¿tienen como único objetivo salvaguardar la privacidad de la persona?

### Second example

16.10.2012 – UNESCO PRESS RELEASE

"Large amounts of funding go to tertiary education, for example, though only a minority of children make it to that stage and most still lack basic skills..."

"Skills strategies must target the disadvantaged: particularly young women and urban and rural poor."

3.- Encuentra en el texto las siguientes palabras/frases. Escríbelas a continuación:

**Conectores:** 2 palabras que implican contrastar ideas "but".

**Verbos modales:** 1 frase verbal que quiere decir “debe”.

### Third example

**What Is Moral Conflict?** By Michelle Maiese July 2003 (Source: [www.beyondintractability.org](http://www.beyondintractability.org))

“...These patterns of meaning shape the way that individuals understand facts and issues and help them to develop a sense of identity.”

4.- Escribe el significado de las siguientes palabras, teniendo en cuenta el presente contexto.

Shape:

### Fourth example

16.10.2012 – UNESCO PRESS RELEASE

“Not investing in young people’s skills leaves them either adding to unemployment statistics in rich countries, or trapped in jobs earning poverty line wages in low-income countries.”

5.- Escribe una oración que se encuentra en el texto que contiene una frase que propone una alternativa (o...o). Tradúcela al español.

### 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is essential to be acquainted with the learning process of reading skills to guarantee good results and success.

Apart from that, it is very important to make use of students’ backgrounds and academic knowledge to boost confidence, explore tools which are available, and the strategies already developed, profit from similarities and differences of both languages, and seek new resources and make adjustments when necessary.

I hope this essay will be of use to other teachers and, in this way, make a small contribution to better results in the teaching-learning process.

Moreover, it can be a stepping stone towards narrowing the gap and building a bridge between students’ background knowledge and their desired target: to become independent learners who can deal with English sources for academic or business purposes by making use of their reading skills.

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