



How to make the most of reading texts

The challenges

A reading text can be treated as a body of language to be analysed and as a body of information about a topic or subject. Success in dealing with reading texts depends on balancing these two aspects in order to equip learners with the skills they need to become more competent readers. In addition, it is important to ensure that the reading activities we ask learners to do are suited to their language level, relevant to their needs, and in tune with their interests.

Four tips for working with reading texts

1 Prepare students for reading

Students are more likely to enjoy a reading text if they have had a chance to engage with the topic of the text beforehand. They are also more likely to understand the text if their attention is drawn to some key vocabulary before they start to read. Read the text yourself before class and think about it in terms of both topic and language. Is there any background information that would be useful for students to know? How might you introduce key information and facts relevant to the topic before reading? Are there any key vocabulary items which need to be pre-taught? Which structures or features of language would you like to draw your students' attention to?

2 Explore texts from different perspectives

The same text can be read in different ways and for different reasons. Make sure that students have clear objectives for reading and that the objectives enable them to tackle texts in different ways. Think about activities that students can do before reading and activities they can do after reading. Aim to ask different kinds of comprehension questions, e.g. global understanding questions will require students to read the whole text quickly, while detailed information questions will require them to read parts of the text more closely. Bear in mind that the activity of reading requires students to recognize known language *and* notice new language, and the activities we do in class should guide them towards both.

3 Provide a variety of text types

The texts that students read in class should reflect the diversity of texts they are likely to encounter outside the classroom. Articles, questionnaires, emails, web pages, stories, quizzes, and interviews can all be used to present relevant language and introduce topics of interest. Encourage students to notice the distinctive features of various text genres and get them to look for similarities between the texts they read in class and those they read outside

the class. Using a diversity of text types is beneficial for other reasons: because individual learners have different interests and reading preferences, a variety of text types provides greater opportunities for reading activities in which all students can find something to engage and motivate them.

4 Use a range of activities

There are more ways to respond to a text than simply answering comprehension questions. To bring interest and variety to your reading classes, try to use a range of different activities, e.g.

- Build the bridge between reception and production by integrating reading texts with writing, speaking, and listening.
- Energize reading activities by exploiting your students' memory skills, setting time limits for reading, or getting students to work collaboratively.
- Use games, whether competitive or cooperative, to add enjoyment to the lesson.
- Personalize the experience of reading. Use anecdotes and stories from your own life to get students interested in the topic of the text. Ask them to give their opinion about what they have read.
- Offer options and choices, wherever possible. Students are more likely to engage with reading if they are given choices about what to read and how they read, e.g. provide two similar texts on different topics and let students choose which one to read.
- If possible, get students out of their seats. Activities which get students moving around the classroom can make reading more interactive and interesting.
- Playing an audio version of a text for students to listen to while they read is an effective way to give extra support. Being able to hear the words as well as see the text helps students understand the text and also models pronunciation.
- Reading a text aloud can be useful but treat this activity with care. When students read a text aloud, they often don't pay attention to what they are reading. It can also be embarrassing or stressful for some students. Have a clear reason for asking your students to read aloud, otherwise it is often better for them to read quietly.

Six activities for making the most of reading texts

Some of these activities refer to reading texts from *English Plus Student's Book*, 1st edition, a coursebook for teenagers at A1–A2 level on the CEFR, but the activities could be done with any coursebook or reading text.



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1 A sample sentence

Aims To prepare students for reading by focusing on a single sentence in the text; to introduce language and vocabulary; to elicit ideas and encourage students to make predictions

Sorry? What's your name?

What? No surname?

First names were important in England in the 11th century. The population was small and most people lived in villages. Surnames or family names weren't necessary because there weren't many people. When the French King William I invaded England in 1066, he wasn't happy with this. In his opinion, people needed surnames.

The English choose their surnames

In those days, there were different ways to choose a surname: some people used their job (Baker, Cook), some used places (Hill, Wood), and some used their nickname (Short, Brown) or the name of a parent (Johnson = son of John).

First names of the past

These old surnames are common in modern Britain, but many first names are different. There is nothing new about naming a child after a famous person, but the type of celebrity is different today. In the past, the names of kings, queens, scientists, artists or writers were fashionable. For example, when Victoria was Queen of England in the 19th century, her name was very popular.

Fans and stars

Many British parents today name their children after pop stars, sports stars, or film stars like Kylie, Keira, Brad, and Wayne. **They do this because they are fans of these celebrities.** One football fan named his baby after the Manchester United team. His son has got a first name and ten middle names!

Is it a baby or a car?

Other parents want their children to have original first names and they sometimes choose the brand names of products. One year there were 298 Armanis, 49 Canons, 5 Jaguars, 1 Xerox and 353 girls named Lexus.

(*English Plus Student's Book 1*, 1st edition, p. 60)

- 1 Take a single sentence from a reading text that you are planning to use with your class and write it on the board, e.g. the highlighted sentence from the text above: 'They do this because they are fans of these celebrities.'
- 2 Ask students the meaning of *fans* and *celebrities*. Allow them to guess, if necessary, and then explain the meanings of the words, either by

giving examples or by translating them. Ask the students if they are fans of any celebrities.

- 3 Ask students to guess who *they* in the sentence refers to. Write their answers on the board. Then provide the correct answer: in this sentence *they* refers to *parents*. Change the sentence on the board so that it now reads 'Parents do this because they are fans of these celebrities.'
- 4 Ask students what *this* in the sentence refers to: 'What do you think parents do?' Allow students time to think and make predictions. Write some of their ideas on the board before confirming the correct answer: they name their children after their favourite celebrities.
- 5 Ask students to guess some of the most popular celebrity names. Then read the text.

2 Story bingo with new words

Aims To prepare students for reading by presenting a short narrative; to introduce vocabulary through a personalized anecdote; to elicit ideas and encourage students to make predictions

An adventure story

My brother Peter and I were on a jungle wildlife holiday with six other people and Juan our guide. It was an amazing experience and we saw lots of monkeys, crocodiles and huge snakes. But one morning Peter and I did a very stupid thing. We wanted to take photos of monkeys. We got up early and walked into the jungle. We didn't have to go far before we heard some monkeys. We were **excited** and we followed the monkeys for about ten minutes. Suddenly, Peter stopped. He was **worried**. "I'm not going to walk further," he said. "We'll get lost. I'm going back." We looked around us. There were trees everywhere. The campsite wasn't far, but we had no idea which direction to take. "I think we are already lost," Peter said. "How are we going to get back? Nobody knows where we are. They'll never find us." Then it started to rain. Luckily, I had a waterproof coat. We sat on our rucksacks with the coat over our heads. There were loads of mosquitoes and we had no insect repellent. We were **scared** and **miserable**. After two hours, we heard a noise. It was Juan and he was **angry**. "You're very **lucky**," he said. But we were very happy. "We're never going to follow monkeys again," we promised. Juan laughed, "Come on. Let's go back to camp."

(*English Plus Student's Book 1*, 1st edition, p. 80)

- 1 Select five or six key vocabulary items from a text that you are going to read in class and write the words on the board. Do this before students



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see the text. For example, in the story above the words might be *excited*, *worried*, *scared*, *miserable*, *angry*, and *lucky*.

- 2 Mime one of the words and invite the students to guess which one it is. Confirm the answer and check that everyone understands the meaning. Repeat until all the words have been mimed, offering students the chance to mime a word they know, if they would like to.
- 3 Ask students to choose four of the words on the board and write them on a bingo grid. Then tell students you are going to tell them a story containing some of these words.
- 4 Using language your students already know, tell a simple story (that you prepared before the lesson) based on something that happened to you. Each time you come to one of the words on the board, pause and point at it. Get students to guess which word comes next in the story. Confirm their guesses by underlining the correct word. Students cross that word off their bingo grid. Continue until a student is able to cross off all four words and shout 'Bingo!'
- 5 Tell the students they are now going to read a story which contains the same words. What do they think the story will be about? Listen to their predictions, then read the story.

Variation Not all words can be mimed easily. Instead of mime, you could draw or describe the key words, or get students to do the same.

3 Rebuilding a sentence

Aims To use a sentence from the text as a basis for developing language awareness; to encourage students to notice new language; to provide an opportunity for interaction and communication

- 1 Choose a sentence from a text you have been working on in class. Make sure that the sentence contains a structure that you would like to draw students' attention to. For example, in 'An adventure story' (see activity 2 above, near the end of the story), the sentence could be *We're never going to follow monkeys again*, and the language focus is *going to*.
- 2 Before class, write each word from the sentence in large letters on a separate card so that the whole class can see the words easily. (In this example, you will need seven cards.)
- 3 Ask for a volunteer for each card. Get the volunteers to come to the front and face the rest of the class. Explain that the volunteers are not allowed to speak, and they must follow the instruction given to them.

- 4 Mix up the cards and hand one to each volunteer. The volunteers hold the cards so that the rest of the class can see them.
- 5 Tell the class that the words on the cards form a sentence but they are in the wrong order. Invite the rest of the class to put the words into the correct order by instructing the volunteers to change places with one other. They shout out their instructions and the volunteers should follow them. Continue until the volunteers are standing in the right order.
- 6 Collect the cards and tell the volunteers to go back to their places. Ask the class to write down the sentence in their exercise books from memory. Check their answers.
- 7 Ask students to find the sentence in the reading text, and then ask them to look for other sentences in the text containing the *going to* structure.

4 Running dictation

Aims To encourage collaboration and team-work; to integrate reading skills with other skills

- 1 Select the first paragraph of a text that you are going to read in class and divide it into four sections. Copy each section of the text onto a large piece of paper, number the pieces of paper from one to four, and stick them onto the four walls of the classroom.
- 2 Put the students into teams made up of pairs or small groups. Each team has a 'runner' who reads and a 'scribe' who writes. The runners can move around the room; the scribes stay in their seats.
- 3 Explain that the activity is a race to see which team can successfully transcribe the text through dictation.
- 4 Begin the activity. In each team the runner's job is to go to the first piece of paper, read and memorize the text it contains, return to their team, and dictate it to the scribe, who writes it down.
- 5 Continue in this way until all four sections of the text have been dictated and transcribed.
- 6 Check the answers with the whole class. The winning team is the one that transcribes the text with the fewest mistakes in the shortest time.
- 7 Explain that the dictated text is the first paragraph of a reading text. Ask further questions about what students think the text will be about. Elicit their ideas before going on to read the complete text.



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Variations Do not number the four pieces of paper. When the teams have finished the dictation, they should put the sections of the text into the correct order.

Get students to change roles mid-activity: after dictating the first part of the text, the runner becomes the scribe and the scribe becomes the runner.

5 From article to interview

Aims To draw students' attention to the differences in text types; to get students to predict interview questions based on the information in an article; to help students anticipate the language used in interviews

Living at school

1 Can you describe your typical day?

Yes. We get up at 6.45 and have breakfast at 7.45. Classes are from 8.30 until 3.15, with an hour for lunch at 12.30. After classes we've got activities from 3.45 to 5.30 and then dinner is at 5.45. We do our homework at 7.30 and bedtime is at 10.30.

2 What activities do you do?

I do football twice a week. I can play the violin and I'm in the school orchestra. We practise three times a week.

3 Have you got any free time?

We haven't got much free time in the week. We have a break before homework when we can relax, chat with friends or watch TV. Sunday afternoon is also free.

4 What do you do at the weekend?

There are classes on Saturday mornings, then sports and free-time activities in the afternoon. Sometimes we can go to the swimming pool on Sundays.

5 Is the food OK?

It isn't bad. You can choose your food. There's a cafeteria with salads, pizzas, sandwiches and different 'specials' every day.

6 What do you like about boarding?

I like sharing a room with my two best friends. Also, we've got everything here at school – tennis courts, a gym, computers and sports fields. That's great.

7 Are you ever homesick?

Sometimes, but people here are friendly and we're really busy. I can't live at home because my parents work abroad. I see them three times a year in the holidays.

(*English Plus* Student's Book 1, 1st edition, p. 50)

- 1 Find an appropriate text which uses an interview format, such as the example text above. Select the key points of information in the text and write them on the board or in a handout in the form of a short article or profile. For example, the information *I like sharing a room with my two best friends* can be written up as 'He likes sharing a room with his two best friends'.
- 2 Get students to read the article you have created.
- 3 Ask the students to predict interview questions and answers based on the information provided. Check their ideas and write them on the board.
- 4 Read the interview. Compare the students' ideas with the actual questions and answers in the interview.
- 5 If you have time, students could also act out the interview.

Variation This activity can also be done the other way round: begin by reading the interview and ask students to construct a short article or profile using the key points of information in the text.

6 Jigsaw reading

Aims To encourage collaboration and team-work; to integrate reading skills with other language skills

- 1 Find an appropriate text with comprehension questions. Divide the text into three parts, A, B, and C, and make enough copies for every student to receive one part.
- 2 Put the students into groups of three. Give each student in a group one part of the text, A, B, and C, and all of the comprehension questions. Students must not show one another their part of the text.
- 3 Each student reads the text they have received and answers as many of the comprehension questions as they can, using the information in the part of the text they have been given.
- 4 Working in their groups, students read out the questions they cannot answer. The student in the group who has the part of the text containing the answer says what it is, and the others write it down.
- 5 Allow the students to show one another their texts. Go through the comprehension questions together and check the answers.

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