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Title	Reading comprehension in the general paper
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Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 6(1)18-22
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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# READING COMPREHENSION IN THE GENERAL PAPER

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## Introduction

The teaching of reading comprehension at the Pre-University level involves two stages. The first is the teaching of the various reading and comprehension skills using short passages and paragraphs and the second stage is the application of these skills to longer passages. The comprehension passages in the General Paper are generally about 700-800 words in length followed by questions on comprehension and vocabulary.

The teaching of this section of the General Paper has seldom been discussed. There could be as many approaches as there are teachers. While this is not necessarily bad, I feel that a standard approach is sometimes necessary for new teachers. This approach can help these teachers to conduct their lessons effectively when they are first asked to teach the subject. As they become more experienced, they may come up with their own approach or make changes to this basic approach according to the needs of the class. Like all approaches, this can only be a general one. Undoubtedly each class will have their differences, but I feel that the approach is generally applicable to all classes.

## The Approach

In this plan, I have identified several stages in the teaching of a comprehension passage. These stages are somewhat similar to the stages proposed for the teaching of the topics in the essay section. I have however, borrowed the terms for the first four stages from Phillips (84). The stages are:

- Pre-reading
- Skimming and Scanning
- Decoding/Intensive Reading
- Review and Comprehension check

- Transfer
- Evaluation and Feedback

### **Pre-Reading**

Stage 1 is the motivational and pre-reading stage. Research has shown that students comprehend better if they possess knowledge of the topic they are dealing with. In this stage therefore, the teacher can help to build expectations about the material to be read. This is both motivating and useful as it prepares the students for what is to come. The teacher may have such activities as brainstorming and prediction to generate ideas. To encourage prediction, the teacher can put the title on the board and invite the students to speculate on the contents of the passage. Or she may give the first or the last line, the first or the last paragraph and then get the students to predict the rest.

Students' ideas can be put on the board for verification after the reading is done.

### **Skimming and Scanning**

Stage 2 concentrates on skimming and scanning the passage for certain information. These are useful activities because they allow the students to acquire a global view of the passage. Before allowing the students to read the passage, the teacher puts a few questions on the board to direct the students' reading. Students can be given a fixed time to skim for the answers. In encouraging skimming for the gist of the passage, the teacher can list some of these tasks (from Phillips) for the students:

- getting the gist of the passage.
- identifying topic sentence or the main idea.
- multiple choice questions on the best paraphrase for the main idea or conclusion.
- thinking of a title for the passage.
- making judgement on the passage.

In skimming, the teacher asks what the passage is about. In scanning, she gets students to identify the main ideas or concepts or facts. Here, she can similarly pose questions but this time on more specific details. Once it has been established that the gist of the passage is clear and some of the important details identified, the teacher can move on to stage 3.

### **Decoding/Intensive Reading**

In this next stage, the students do intensive reading. Here they will go through the passage silently and deal with the ideas in each paragraph. Here, it is useful to teach students the importance of noting the main ideas on the paper with their pencils. This includes underlining, labelling key concepts, classifying different events or writing summary statements for each paragraph for reference later. This exercise is important because the act of breaking down the text into its basic concepts helps students to understand it better. It also enables them to locate ideas within the passage quickly.

After breaking the text down into various components or ideas, students should be encouraged to summarise the main ideas. This summary can be in various forms. The points can be simply written down in a logical order to show the trend of argument, i.e., to make a list. If the passage is factual and lends itself to diagrams, students should be encouraged to draw these diagrams or charts to summarise the main ideas. Finally, they can also write the summary out in prose form although I personally find that this is too difficult for the students. Furthermore, there is sometimes a question on writing a summary. The students can then use their notes for this purpose.

At the same time, students should also be encouraged to tackle difficult words by first identifying them and later making guesses at their meanings. Here, students should apply those skills of arriving at the meaning of a word through context clues or structural analysis.

### **Review and Comprehension Check**

In the fourth stage, time should be spent reviewing the students' work in stage 3. This means presentation of ideas and diagrams by individual groups and the discussion of the ideas in the passage. Here the teacher can take the opportunity to clarify any doubts and to pose some different questions requiring evaluation, inference and application on the students' part. Note that these questions must be made up by the teacher with the aim of enhancing understanding and are not the questions given at the end of the passage. These can therefore be short true/false questions, multiple choice questions or open ended questions.

### **Transfer**

Once the teacher is satisfied with the students' comprehension, she can move on to the next stage. Here the actual written work is given based on the questions provided with the passage. Sometimes, students may find the questions too difficult. There is nothing to prevent the teacher from devising some simpler questions to be dealt with first. After these, the students may have more confidence and understanding of the passage to tackle the original questions.

### **Evaluation and Feedback**

The teacher can again allow for students' evaluation before marking the papers herself. Going over the answers is also important as this is a form of feedback to the students.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to re-emphasise the fact that this is not the only approach to the teaching of the subject. However, I think there are several advantages in having a defined approach to teaching any subject. In this case, the advantages are:

- it allows for maximum student participation and encourages students to work on the passage to get at the meaning.
- it allows for maximum practice of various skills of reading and comprehension.
- it allows the teacher to ensure that there is comprehension before the students attempt the actual questions.
- it allows the teacher to conduct the lesson in a systematic way.

In this way, the teacher can be sure that the comprehension lesson is not merely a hunt for facts to answer the given questions. It should be, by rights, a lesson that allows for both content and reading skills to be taught and learnt simultaneously. Any approach advocated for the teaching of this subject should, therefore, incorporate this fundamental objective.

### **Reference**

Phillips, June K. (1984) "Practical Implications of Recent Research in Reading".  
*Foreign Language Annals*, 17 (4) : 285-296.