
Title	Three activities in reading for understanding
Author(s)	Wharton, Anthony
Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 3(1)53-58
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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THREE ACTIVITIES IN READING FOR UNDERSTANDING

ANTHONY WHARTON

Assuming for the purposes of this article that there are three important levels in comprehension, literal (reading the lines), inferential (reading between the lines) and evaluative (reading above and beyond the lines), the following three practical ideas are suggested to help promote inferential comprehension by activity methods, i.e. to help children go beyond what is immediately apparent in their reading to a more reflective pattern of reading. It is to be observed that the activities would need to be related to an overall (and developmental) reading programme in school and to particular parts of the teaching programme: they are not intended to be sequential in themselves or to operate alone as teaching strategies. Nor is it necessary to assume that only activity methods of this kind promote better reading: they are intended to supplement and complement existing practices. Indeed, the word "activities" can be such a fashionable expression in education that quite what is meant by "activity" should be subject to scrutiny in any case.

Each of the proposed activities is intended to demonstrate one particular role of the teacher, that of neutral chairman. In this role the teacher does not answer questions but can ask questions of individual children or groups. That the "neutral chairman" is finally an illusory target to achieve since, for example, the choice of questions by a neutral chairman may be far from neutral, does not concern us here: the notion of neutral chairman can serve to promote activities in ways that may differ from traditional whole-class teaching and from other provisions of group activities. The activities can serve to help a traditionally whole-class teacher to provide for groups.

1 Oral Cloze Procedure

The first activity uses the cloze procedure on handouts (with the gaps numbered). Children initially collaborate in pairs to discuss how to fill the gaps. Pairs are then joined so that groups of

four children debate their suggestions. One group of four is then put with another four to continue the debate as a group of eight. The procedure is followed till the teacher arrives at the point where the class is divided into two large groups. The teacher continues to act as neutral chairman, asking questions of each group and, in particular, prompting suggestions as to how to fill the cloze gaps. At all stages children are encouraged to be explicit and give reasons for their preference.

The advantages claimed for this treatment of the cloze procedure are:

- Blind guessing and mere blank-filling are reduced.
The solitariness of writing is relieved.
- The oral work is valuable in itself, particularly as much of it is in peer group terms.
- Earlier exploratory discussion gives way to more and more explicit debate as the procedure is carried out.
- Children may not feel that the cloze procedure always tests them. The procedure recommended here encourages the search for alternatives and explicit debate.
- The procedure is adaptable: the strategic “gapping” of grammatical, linking or lexical items is possible.
- No extra preparation is required.

It goes without saying that the oral approach to cloze recommended here is not intended to occupy every comprehension or cloze lesson. It is also up to the teacher whether to supply the “gapped” words finally or not. In view of the role of the teacher as neutral chairman, it seems advisable that on this occasion at least the “answers” are not provided. What has been provided is an opportunity for children not to feel “tested” and to learn by collaboration with their classmates (under the guidance, of course, of their teacher).

2 Narrative Anticipation

The second activity for improving inferential comprehension also makes use of contextual clues that draw rather more heavily on the reader's knowledge of the world, i.e. involving increased interaction of reader and text. The activity is designed

to encourage young or reluctant readers to go beyond the first page of a book and predict what is going to happen later in the story. A short story is written by the teacher in short chunks on separate overhead transparencies. The first transparency is shown and the teacher can ask "What does the title suggest?", "Where are the events taking place?", "What sort of people are present?" and "What is likely to happen next?". Various suggestions can be quickly taken from around the class to promote a debate about the merits of what, after all, are competing hypotheses (a form of thinking not generally promoted in schools). As each transparency is shown fresh clues appear, new possible strong lines emerge and old possibilities are revised. (Silly suggestions are catered for by showing the next transparency which continues the story, adds more and rules out such suggestions.) The object is to arouse curiosity, questions and a habit of casting ahead in one's mind as to the likely outcome of the story.

One such story is given below. There is no copyright attached, so anybody is free to use it but this particular story was designed to demonstrate the technique at the level of trainee teachers. It will be seen that four transparencies are suggested for this particular story. A variation in this activity is not to produce the last transparency at all but to encourage children to make explicit to themselves the ways they see the story developing by writing up the ending. In the choice of story material the teacher can be guided by what materials are readily available in schools: books which are considered suitable for particular children can be adapted to this activity. The activity is particularly suitable to encourage reluctant book readers to read past the first page of a book.

THE LONG WAIT

1

The morning was grey. Slowly the light moved round the room picking out the table, the chair the door, the bed.

Not surprisingly Schmidt was loath to get out of bed. After all, what was there to look forward to but the same routine? He automatically swung his feet to the floor and prepared to face another day.

2

Schmidt was joined by Jackson and together they went through the same conversation, the same exchanges, that they had enacted each day for so long.

They had hoped for a letter but there was none. Instead they re-read their one and only newspaper, by now so far deteriorated by repeated reading that its final collapse seemed imminent.

Their desultory conversation paused at the sound of footsteps in the corridor. The door opened to admit their heavily-escorted lunch. They gathered their fragments of news together to make way for the metal plates and the resumption of a well-rehearsed conversation.

3

Still it was good to meet a friend in the midst of such strange circumstances. They went through the motions of eating their midday meal. Today, as usual, the rice was cold, the meat tepid.

As the afternoon wore on, the stagnant heat closed in on them, torpor settled everywhere. It was all the more unusual, then, to see activity at the gate. The guard moved quickly to admit a messenger who pushed his way, flushed and excited, directly to the senior officer's quarters.

4

There was a long delay. Schmidt, Jackson and the others played at guessing the message until they grew tired and irritable. The senior officer approached. "A peace has been signed. There is to be an exchange of prisoners and you are to go to Hanoi first, later to the United States."

3 Inference for Advanced Students with Limited English

The third activity faces a different problem. Bright children do not need to have their intelligence insulted by working on tasks which are cognitively below their level. The problem is how to devise controlled language practice around a higher level of thinking. The following is suggested as one approach. Children are put in groups armed with limited information. In this case, there is only one answer so that the groups' answers are easily seen to be right or wrong by the participants themselves who can work in groups with pen and paper. They should rapidly see the need for a diagram.

One such problem is given below, together with the solution. For those teachers who feel that this activity suits some of their students it is possible for other similar activities to be devised by seeing what variables are at work and inventing new names for the same number of variables. For example, instead of athletics another activity might be centred round partial information on cars, their makes, colours, drivers' nationalities, etc. This activity is particularly suitable for controlled practice of modal verbs: "If the Frenchman is in lane 3 then the American must be/has to be . . .", and "No, that can't be right because if the Frenchman was in lane 3, then the American can't be in lane 4 and so . . ."

Find the Winner!

You have been waiting for the results of a 200m race on the radio but there was considerable radio interference as the results came through. Fortunately, you made a note of the bits of information that you did hear. Now you have to work out the results!

The information:

- 1 The runner in lane 4 was .2 seconds slower than the German.
- 2 The American finished in 20.6 seconds.
- 3 The Englishman was in the lane immediately inside the Frenchman.
- 4 The runner in lane 3 was .3 seconds behind the winner.
- 5 The Russian was in the lane immediately outside the American.
- 6 The runner in lane 2 finished in 20 seconds.
- 7 The runner in lane 1 finished one place ahead of the American.
- 8 The Russian fell over.

Solution to "Find the Winner!"

- 1 The American can't be in lane 1, 2, 3 or 5 (deduced from Nos. 7, 6 & 2, 4 & 6 & 2, 5).
- 2 so the Russian must be in lane 5.
- 3 so the German must have finished in 20.4 (No. 1)
- 4 the German can't be in lane 3 (Nos. 4 & 6) and he can't be in lane 2 (No. 3), so he must be in lane 1.
- 5 so the Englishman must be in lane 2 and the Frenchman in lane 3.
- 6 so the Englishman won in 20 seconds, the Frenchman came second in 20.3, the German third in 20.4, the American fourth in 20.6 and the Russian last with no time.

These three activities are only suggestions but they all encourage the neutral chairman role on the part of the teacher. For the teacher who has problems adapting from class teaching to group teaching, these three activities provide opportunities to remain clearly in control of the lesson but involved in asking questions to promote student-student debate and providing materials suitable for groups to work with.

NOTES

- 1 Acknowledgement is made to the work of Christopher Walker and others.
- 2 A version of this paper was presented to the English Language Teachers Association of Singapore on 27 March 1982.