

TEACHING STUDENTS TO READ RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Advanced students, whether they speak English as their first or second language, struggle to read research in technical fields like linguistics. Students must learn how to read scholarship in the right way, to participate meaningfully in classes and begin their own research. This poster shares our experiences with this at Cuban and U.S. universities.

At the University of Holguín, undergraduates in English receive a course on Academic English. The course emphasizes the reading process: well structured questions followed by discussions, seminars, round tables, etc. ensure their ability to use the language academically.

For graduate students in Mississippi, these skills are built into content-based seminars. So that all students engage each article, the professor gives them guided reading questions to answer in writing. Students use their written answers as the basis for class discussion, which can take up a full hour. This method puts native and international students on the same footing, because everyone has prepared a written script to speak from.

These methods have resulted in effective student research. In both Holguín and Mississippi, process reading leads to process writing. By teaching students how articles are structured, they can better identify the thesis and understand how arguments are developed. In addition, focus on the structure of articles trains students to write according to the social-science model. Through the reading and writing processes, students develop a writing product, which shows that they can use English in their content areas and function in the academic world as researchers and teachers

1. Introduction

Advanced students, whether they speak English as their first or second language, struggle to read research in technical fields like linguistics. Students must learn how to read scholarship in the right way, to participate meaningfully in classes and begin their own research. This poster shares our experiences with teaching different kinds of students at two different universities: undergraduate and graduate students of English at the University of Holguín in Cuba and graduate students in Linguistics/TESOL at the University of Mississippi in the U.S.

2. Undergraduate students of English at the University of Holguín

A) At the University of Holguín, undergraduate students majoring in English need to acquire a good command of the English language at a professional level. They are taught and trained to become language teachers, translators and interpreters. In the case of reading, besides taking several reading courses, including one on Reading Academic English, they also have to deal with Research Methodology and the presentation of research papers, so they must be ready to face any academic reading and writing. The methodology of these courses include an emphasis on the reading process rather than on the reading product: well-structured questions followed by discussions, seminars, round tables, and the like are used creatively to ensure their ability to use the language academically. Here is an example of a procedure followed by Professor Karel Cuenca in his lessons (3rd year students of the English Language Major):

Reading research texts:

Decoding activity for the shaping of the explanatory synthesis essay

1. The teacher hands out a set of two texts per table so students can work in couples.
2. The students should brainstorm to generate global ideas on the content of both texts based on the title of them both.
3. The students should perform a first silent reading to skim for the general overlapping topic present in both texts.
4. The teacher asks the students to answer questions that condition the use of information extracted from both texts at the same time.
5. The students fill out a table assisting to categories such as cause and effect, advantages and disadvantages, situation according to the text and situation in the students' social context, pros and cons, etc. These pieces of information can either be part of the text or the knowledge and experience of students.
6. The teacher asks students to transform sentences with specific vocabulary from both texts by replacing keywords with synonyms.
7. The teacher asks the students to write a summary of the information in both texts by respecting the authors' points of view.
8. The students should write an explanatory synthesis essay by following the steps presented by the teacher.

Shaping of the synthesis

- Choose wisely the main ideas to each of the paragraphs in the body: all ideas should be extracted from specific points of interest that appear in all documents at once.
- Specific support is to be assessed once the main ideas are clear. This does not mean that information will be transferred from the documents into your synthesis.
- There should be a thesis statement and a blueprint comprising the main ideas to be developed in the paragraphs of the body.

B) Specifically, within the Subject Didactics of Foreign Language, future teachers are expected to be contributing to students' foreign language learning process, so they are trained to deal with the foreign language teaching and learning process from an early stage in their major. While dealing with teaching the language skills, in the specific case of reading, the students are asked to select and interpret the content of the texts that they would use in their classes and say why they've made that selection. Also, since they'd have to conduct educational research on various aspects of education including student learning, teaching methods, and classroom dynamics among other topics, reading research is an intricate part of the didactic lessons. Before the workshop dedicated to discussing their actual research, or possible research topic, a research article on a related topic is handed in and the following scientific text analysis is carried out:

Analysis of a research article

<u>General questions:</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What is the research topic of the article you read?- In what way the content of the article relates to educational research, specifically with the field of foreign language teaching and learning?
<u>Specific questions</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Is the abstract concise enough to give a clear idea of the study? Does the author draw the reader into the study and entice them to read the rest of the article?- In what way the introduction of the study (aim and method) contribute to the results expected by the author?- Does the author present the information in an accurate and clear way? Provide examples.- Do you think that the author uses vague terminology and too much prose? What about the use of scientific language? Sustain your opinion.- Are the research results and the assessment of the study clearly presented?
<u>Personal questions:</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Were you motivated while reading the text?- What is the contribution of the study to your specific scientific field? Any points of contact?- Refer to the validity of this study to your own study.- If you were to conduct a similar research to the one under discussion what would you do in a similar /different way

C) When dealing with students from majors other than English the situation is different since their knowledge of the language is at a lower level. Still, they need to conduct research and present a summary of their research paper in English. So, even if in the English language lessons emphasis is put on developing reading skills in general, some of the reading lessons are aimed at developing the students' research skills in dealing with scientific texts related to the major they are enrolled in. For these students Professor Creach assigns the article and this discussion guide in advance:

Discussion guide for reading an article

- Read the introduction of the article and state the kind of research it is.
- Describe the methodology used in the article
- According to the statistical method used, what's the percentage that best explained the study conducted?
- What's the author's opinion on the matter?
- Write your appreciation of the results presented and submit it to the teacher before the class meeting.

Once in the class meeting, Professor Creach divides the group into 5 teams. Each team will discuss one of the aspects of the discussion guide. The discussion involves the whole class. Since the members of each team don't know which aspect they are going to discuss, they need to read and comprehend the whole article. The submission of the final aspect will complement the assessment.

3. Graduate students of English at the University of Holguín

The courses for graduate students are prepared combining reading & writing: from the process to the product so that the students show their abilities to use activities in English (such as problem-solving activities) by content area and are ready to function in the academic world.

Reading research indicates that good readers are actively involved in the reading process. When dealing with scientific texts, consider their complexity as a product as well as the linguistic, the rhetorical, and the conceptual variables. In the case of graduate students, who need to read

scientific texts related to their field of knowledge, emphasis is put on reading comprehension even long before the actual reading of a given text begins. The main focus is understanding the scientific content and be able to use it in a similar or different context.

To optimize text *readability*, several steps are followed:

Three-step reading process for scientific texts

<p>1. Before Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- A given topic is provided by the teacher or suggested by the students, at least a week in advance.- Students bring to class several articles related to the topic to be discussed in class. Sometimes one specialized article per student.- They present a brief summary of the text they've read.- The teacher or one of the students write on the board relevant information/ terminology provided by each of the students' presentations.- At the end, there is a graphic organization (content map) on the board/ screen that will be used later to help students organize and represent the content knowledge of the topic under discussion, enabling them to evaluate relevant information that will appear later in the text they are going to deal with in the reading lesson.
<p>2. Reading:</p> <p>Two texts related to the given topic are distributed. The students are asked to scan the text and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Identify the information they are already familiar with (concepts, definitions, processes...)- Locate the specific terminology pertaining to the specialized topic under discussion.- Find a sentence that better describes the content of the text, or provide one of their own.- Say in what way the two texts present relevant information on the topic. Support your answer.- Summarize that relevant information in a chart or content map.
<p>3. After Reading. Using generalization and personalization.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- What is the usefulness of the procedure/process/technology presented in the text?- If the information and results presented relevant to your field of knowledge?- What would you do in the same way?/ in a different way?- Using the content map on the text already analyzed, try to produce a similar one using information from you own field of knowledge.- Submit a written summary of a research work you are intending to carry out.

4. M.A. students in Linguistics/TESOL at the University of Mississippi

Graduate students in Linguistics and TESOL at the University of Mississippi come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are native speakers of English, while others have learned English as a second language. Some have undergraduate degrees in linguistics, while others majored in English or another language. What they all have in common, as beginning graduate students, is that they struggle to read journal articles (Chen 2017). Reading academic articles in English is a crucial skill that is rarely taught in graduate programs (Wohl & Fine 2016). Undergraduates are accustomed to reading textbooks, which summarizes research and packages diverse findings in a student-friendly way. When they are faced with more difficult readings, they often rely on the professor to explain the material to them. However, from the moment that students enter a graduate program, they are expected to read and analyze original scholarship without the help of professor and then come to class prepared for deep discussion of the methods and findings of the research.

For these reasons, the typical seminar format is often unsuccessful when the seminar participants are novice graduate students. Typically, each session of the seminar is structured around reading and discussing a research paper. The professor may lead the discussion or assign one student to lead the discussion. This leads to several problems. First, the majority of students in the course may not read the article thoroughly or may not read it at all. Secondly, the students often fail to understand the purpose of the study, the key data, or the most important results, because they have not learned how to read papers that are structured in the social-science format. Finally, non-native speakers of English find themselves at a disadvantage during the discussion, because they have not prepared themselves to speak in class.

After seeing these problems with the usual seminar course, Prof. Sapp developed a method to build reading and analytical skills into every content-based graduate seminar. He has used this method to great success in several courses, including Second-Language Syntax, Seminar in Morphology, and Old Norse.

Before every session that is dedicated to discussion of a research article, Dr. Sapp assigns one student to present the main findings of the article. Obviously the presenter will read the article in great depth, in order to prepare for this presentation. So that all other students are also prepared for discussion, every student besides the presenter must type answers to the following set of reading questions:

Reading questions for linguistics articles

As you read each article, prepare for discussion by answering the following questions. Please type your answers and turn them in to me at the end of class.

1. How accurately does the abstract summarize the article? Why or why not?
2. Which sentence from the introduction is the thesis sentence/research question?
3. Which work in the literature review does the author build on most? Argue most against?
4. Name one strength and one weakness of the methodology.
5. Which table or statistic presents the key data of the study? Briefly summarize the most important data in your own words.
6. How do those data answer the research question?
7. How can these results inform your own second-language teaching?

The class meeting is then structured as follows. For the first 20-30 minutes, the presenter gives a formal presentation, summarizing the main findings of the article, often with slides. After that presentation, the class is open for discussion. Prof. Sapp then calls on students to read (or paraphrase) their answers to the first reading question. Every student is able to participate, because everyone has typed up an answer before class. Often students have different opinions, leading to a vigorous class discussion. When the first question has been satisfactorily discussed, Prof. Sapp prompts each student to read his/her answer to the second question. Usually the entire 1 hour, 15 minute class period is taken up with discussion of the questions. At the end of class, all students except the presenter submit their typed answers to Dr. Sapp. The answers are assessed only on whether they show that the students have thoroughly read the article.

You may notice that the questions are mostly about the structure of the article. In fact, the questions closely mirror the typical structure of the social-science paper: abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, data, results, and implications. The idea here is to highlight the most important aspects of every paper: What is the research question? How does the study fit with other research on the topic? How was the study conducted? What were the results? Why is the study important?

This method has had several advantages. First, because the answers must be submitted in writing, all students make an effort to read and understand the article as best they can before class. Secondly, this method puts native and international students on the same footing, because everyone has prepared a written script to use as the basis for speaking in class. Thirdly, the questions teach the students what Wohl & Fine (2016) identify as the two most important reading strategies: the “graduate skim” (identifying the main findings and arguments) and the “deep dive” (identify weaknesses in the methodology; consider broader implications). Finally, the questions’ focus on the structure of the article helps students recognize the way linguists structure their arguments and encourages them to think about what is considered good writing in linguistics. By the end of the semester, they have seen enough examples of social-science articles that they have many models for writing about their own research. Students are specifically required to structure their research papers according to the social-science model, with seven sections that correspond to the seven reading questions above. After using and refining this method over three semesters, Dr. Sapp has seen an improved classroom environment, and students seem to write better research papers.

5. Comparison

There are a number of commonalities to all of the methods presented here. With the exception of Prof. Cuenca’s lessons, each program requires students to perform the readings before class. Each program also uses targeted reading questions, which guide students to look for key information: the abstract, the methodology, and how the data leads to the conclusions. Then when students come into class, class time is devoted to discussing, evaluating, and applying the research.

However, there are also some differences that result from the different populations of each program. The most inexperienced students are in Prof. Cuenca’s course, and so these students are allowed to perform activities in class that mimic more advanced students’ pre-class activities, such as brainstorming and skimming. Another difference is that the students in Cuba are all non-native speakers of English, so the reading guides may relate more to vocabulary and content; on the other hand, many students at the University of Mississippi are native English speakers, so the focus is on the structure of the argumentation rather than pure reading comprehension.

In all of the programs, process reading leads to process writing. By focusing on the author’s use of terminology, the contribution of the title and abstract to the global understanding of the text, and the overall structure of the argumentation, students learn the conventions of writing within their specific discipline. By becoming aware of the specificities of research texts, they are able to think and function as future researchers, since they are getting familiar with research methodology. In this way, the reading process leads to the writing process, which itself yields a writing product. This product shows that they can use English in their content areas and function in the academic world as researchers and teachers.

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