EFL READING IN THE LESSONS AT SPECIALIZED SCHOOLS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: In this article, reading is discussed as an important part of learning a foreign language. The paper also covers key research concepts such as methods for developing reading skills in specialized schools, bottom-up and top-down reading strategies, schema theory and background knowledge, the impact of emotions and cultural context, and broad reading effectiveness**.**

Keywords: specialized schools, reading competence, communicative reading, EFL, ESL, strategies, theories, background knowledge, top-down and bottom-up processing, cultural context, extensive reading

ЧТЕНИЕ НА УРОКАХ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА В СПЕЦИАЛИЗИРОВАННЫХ ШКОЛАХ В УЗБЕКИСТАНЕ

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Аннотация: В этой статье чтение обсуждается как важная часть изучения иностранного языка. В статье также рассматриваются ключевые исследовательские концепции, такие как методы развития навыков чтения в специализированных школах, стратегии чтения снизу вверх и сверху вниз, теория схем и фоновые знания, влияние эмоций и культурного контекста, а также широкая эффективность чтения.

Ключевые слова: специализированные школы, читательская компетентность, коммуникативные стратегии чтения, теории, фоновые знания, нисходящая и восходящая обработка, культурный контекст, экстенсивное чтение

INTRODUCTION

During his visit to the Iskhakhan Tura Ibrat boarding school, which specializes in advanced foreign language education, on March 5, 2018, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Sh. M. Mirziyoyev, emphasized: "It is essential to train modern professionals proficient in several foreign languages, conduct scientific research on foreign languages, and improve language teaching methodologies." In other words, it is of paramount importance to enhance foreign language teaching methodologies based on communicative activities, person-centered and integrative approaches aimed at developing competencies; to study international experiences; and to implement innovative pedagogical technologies in teaching English at higher grade levels in schools.. In other words, improving the methodology of teaching a foreign language based on a communicative activity, a person-centered, integrative approach aimed at acquiring competencies; studying foreign experience; applying innovative pedagogical technologies in teaching English in high school is of current importance.

It is important for students to thoroughly master foreign languages in educational institutions in order to be aware of the achievements of world science and achieve success in the

process of obtaining information in their field from scientific and technical literature in foreign languages. Raising the level of foreign language teaching in educational institutions of our country to a qualitatively new level is one of the priority tasks. This is evidenced by the adoption of a number of decrees and resolutions in this regard.

MAIN PART

This article discusses reading as an essential part of overall foreign language proficiency, yet it must be viewed within the broader context of interactive language teaching. Key research has influenced methods for teaching reading skills, highlighting concepts like bottom-up and top-down processing, schema theory and background knowledge, the impact of emotions and cultural context, and the effectiveness of extensive reading.

Reading can be understood as interaction, the exchange of information between the person who wrote the text and the reader. Reading is not only a process of obtaining information written on a page, but also a process of understanding this information, drawing conclusions about it, and understanding what the writer wrote and what he meant by it. The study of reading activity is as delicate as it is itself, in which we study a mental phenomenon that we cannot observe (since ordinary reading occurs inside, through the mind) if it is not read aloud.

Reading is the process of obtaining information from written text by understanding it through the direct involvement of the visual sensory system, followed by processing the acquired information. Renowned Uzbek scholar Jamol Jalolov explains reading as the process of extracting meaning (information) from written text (Jalolov, 2012). In his interpretation of reading, he cites Russian scholars I. Berman and V. Bukhbinder with the following quote:

"Reading is the process of perceiving and grasping the meaning of information expressed in written (graphic) symbols." (Jalolov, 2012).

The process of converting information in graphic code into sound code is also defined as reading. Another Uzbek scholar, A. Kuchiboyev, interprets reading as the process of perceiving speech information represented in written symbols and understanding its content (Kuchiboyev, 2020).

Russian scholar R. Milrud, in his manual *"English Teaching Methodology"*, describes reading as a visual-cognitive process (Milrud,2005). That is, during reading, the reader perceives written symbols through their visual sensory system and processes them as information in the mind.
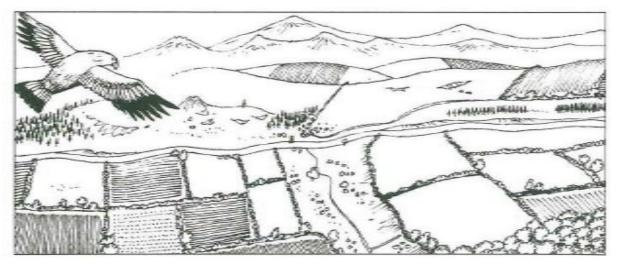
Goodman's research (1970) presented the concept of bottom-up and top-down processing. In bottom-up processing, readers start by identifying a range of linguistic elements—like letters, morphemes, syllables, words, phrases, grammar cues, and discourse markers—and use their language processing skills to organize these elements. This approach, which is driven by data, depends on a strong command of the language. The reader then selects signals from this input that appear to be coherent and meaningful.

When readers draw on prior knowledge and assumptions, it is known as a top-down strategy, as they move from broader, general knowledge and meanings to the more specific details within the text.

Nearly all reading carries a certain level of uncertainty; as Goodman (1970) described, it's a type of guessing game. Readers must engage in a problem-solving process, interpreting meanings, choosing what to focus on or ignore, and then continuing onward. Here, top-down processing becomes essential, as it allows the reader to apply their intelligence and prior experience to make sense of the text. Nuttall (1996) illustrates bottom-up processing as similar to
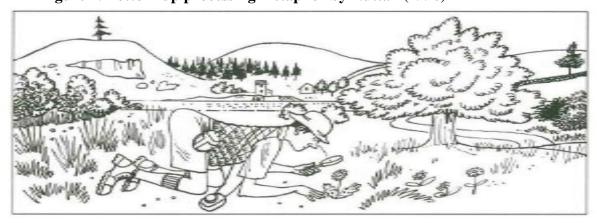
a scientist carefully studying tiny details with a magnifying glass or microscope, while top-down processing resembles an eagle's view of a broad landscape below. This analogy suggests that field-independent cognitive styles align with bottom-up processing, whereas field-dependent styles are comparable to top-down processing.

Figure 1. Top-down processing metaphor by Christine Nuttall (1996)

Brown (2001) notes that about fifty years ago, reading experts might have advocated for a bottom-up approach as the best way to teach reading—starting with symbols, grapheme-phoneme associations, syllables, and word recognition, from which comprehension would naturally follow. However, more recent research has highlighted the effectiveness of combining top-down and bottom-up approaches, now known as "interactive reading." This method is considered crucial for effective teaching, as both approaches contribute to understanding. In practice, readers frequently switch between these methods: beginning with a top-down approach to predict likely meanings, and then shifting to a bottom-up approach to confirm the author's actual message (Nuttall, 1996).

Figure 2. Bottom-up processing metaphor by Nuttall (1996)

Research indicates that readers bring their own information, knowledge, emotions, experiences, and cultural background—known as schemata—to the text. Reading is not primarily a visual activity; rather, readers contribute more meaning than the printed words alone provide. In other words, comprehension occurs because readers can go beyond the visual text, connecting it to relevant concepts already stored in their memories. Effective reading relies on the smooth interaction between linguistic knowledge and an understanding of the world.

It is essential to highlight that a passion for reading has driven many learners to successfully acquire reading skills. Instruction tends to be more effective when students have high self-esteem

(Dole, Brown, and Trathen, 1996). The independence gained by learning reading strategies serves as a powerful source of motivation. Additionally, culture actively influences literacy motivation and reinforcement, as literacy practices are shaped within dynamic cultural systems that establish roles, scripts (such as alphabetic or pictographic), preferred ways of reasoning, and tools that support these practices. Thus, cognitive factors alone cannot fully explain the success of second-language readers (Fitzgerald, 1994).

A current topic in reading pedagogy research is whether learners improve their reading skills more effectively in a rich, immersive environment or through a structured focus on specific reading strategies. Extensive reading (Krashen, 1993) is essential for students to enhance their reading skills, language proficiency, vocabulary, spelling, and writing. Both reading for enjoyment and reading without checking every unfamiliar word have shown strong correlations with overall language proficiency (Green & Oxford, 1995).

Krashen (1993) argues that reading programs should place strong emphasis on teaching extensive reading. While he doesn't advocate abandoning targeted approaches for intensive reading strategies, he reinforces the value of incorporating extensive reading alongside focused instruction. Language instructors often face challenges because students tend not to automatically transfer the reading strategies they use in their native language to the language they are learning. Instead, students frequently believe reading means starting at the beginning, moving through each word individually, and stopping to look up every unfamiliar word until they reach the end. This approach relies solely on linguistic knowledge, following a bottom-up strategy. A key role of the language instructor, therefore, is to encourage students to go beyond this method and adopt top-down strategies, similar to those they use in their native language. By applying these reading strategies, learners can better control their reading process and build confidence in their ability to read in the new language.

Microskills play a crucial role in helping students of English as a foreign language become proficient readers. Brown (2001) highlights several key microskills essential for effective reading tasks. These include reading at a suitable speed for the intended purpose, recognizing a core vocabulary, and interpreting word order and its significance. Learners should also identify grammatical word classes, patterns, rules, and elliptical forms, as well as understand how different grammatical structures can convey the same meaning.

Additionally, recognizing cohesive devices and their role in text interpretation is vital. Students must discern the communicative functions of written texts based on their form and purpose. They should infer implicit context using prior knowledge, identify links and connections between events or ideas, deduce causes and effects, and differentiate between main ideas, supporting ideas, and various types of information like generalizations or examples.

Moreover, it is important to distinguish between literal and implied meanings, interpret culturally specific references within their appropriate cultural frameworks, and employ a range of reading strategies. These strategies include scanning, skimming, identifying discourse markers, deducing word meanings from context, and activating prior knowledge (schemata) to interpret texts effectively.

For many second language learners who are already literate in their native language, improving reading comprehension largely involves cultivating effective and efficient comprehension strategies. These strategies encompass both bottom-up processes, which focus on the details of the text, and top-down processes, which draw on prior knowledge and context.

Here are ten strategies that can be utilized as effective classroom techniques (Brown, 2001).

1. Identify the purpose of reading: Clearly define why you are reading a text to focus on what information you need.

2. Apply graphemic rules and patterns: Use letter-sound rules and patterns to support bottom-up decoding, especially helpful for beginners.

3. Practice efficient silent reading: Employ techniques for silent reading to enhance rapid comprehension, particularly for intermediate and advanced learners.

4. Skim for main ideas: Quickly scan the text to grasp its overall gist, aiding in prediction.

5. Scan for specific details: Search the text swiftly to locate particular pieces of information.

6. Use semantic mapping or clustering: Organize ideas into meaningful groups to bring structure and clarity to the content.

7. Make educated guesses: When unsure, infer the meaning of words, grammatical or discourse relationships, implied meanings, cultural references, and overall content.

8. Analyze vocabulary: Break down words by examining prefixes, suffixes, roots, grammatical context, and semantic clues to understand their meaning.

9. Differentiate literal from implied meanings: Identify both direct meanings and underlying implications in the text.

10. Utilize discourse markers: Recognize and use linking words or phrases to understand relationships within the text.

Brown (2001, p. 315) suggests that students adhere to several principles when developing interactive reading techniques. These include providing explicit instruction in reading skills (while balancing extensive and silent reading), employing engaging and motivating methods, incorporating a mix of authentic texts, fostering the use of effective reading strategies, integrating both bottom-up and top-down approaches, and organizing activities into pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading stages.

He also recommends introducing the topic prior to reading, along with practicing skimming, scanning, predicting, and activating prior knowledge (schemata). The author highlights that students perform better and utilize their knowledge and skills more effectively when they are given an opportunity to gradually engage with the text.

After reading, activities should go beyond comprehension questions to include vocabulary analysis, identifying the author's purpose, exploring the author's reasoning, reviewing grammatical structures, and encouraging students to engage in a writing exercise.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION. The primary objective of EFL/ESL reading instructors is to reduce reading challenges and enhance comprehension by offering culturally relevant context. Goodman highlights this issue, stating that even proficient readers are significantly constrained in their understanding of texts by their prior knowledge. The author of a text can shape its accessibility, especially for intended audiences. However, no author can fully account for the diverse backgrounds and knowledge levels of all potential readers (Goodman, 1979, p. 658).

In light of Goodman's perspective, the role of the teacher in the EFL/ESL reading classroom is to address individual differences among readers, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds. To mitigate these variations, teachers can adapt either the text or the reader by employing bottom-up or top-down strategies or by utilizing the microskills suggested by Brown (2001).

To enhance comprehension for beginning readers, the Language Experience Approach (LEA) (Rigg, 1981) offers an effective method for managing vocabulary, structure, and content. This approach involves creating reading materials based on the students' own ideas and words.

Students decide what they want to express and dictate it to the teacher, who transcribes their thoughts. By reading what they have just composed, students eliminate issues related to unfamiliar content, as they engage with texts they have created themselves.

Another approach to reducing interference from texts is to promote narrow reading (Krashen, 1981). Narrow reading involves focusing on material related to a specific topic or written by a single author. Krashen (1981) argues that narrow reading, and possibly narrow input more broadly, is a more effective method for acquiring a second language. When students concentrate on a single topic or author, they often find the text easier to understand. This is because they become familiar with the recurring vocabulary of the topic or the unique writing style of the author. Additionally, the repeated use of words and structures within the texts provides built-in opportunities for review.

The third way to enhance text comprehension is by creating materials tailored to local contexts and featuring specialized, less common vocabulary. These could include newspapers, pamphlets, brochures, or booklets about local attractions. English travel guides are also valuable resources for EFL/ESL learners.

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is an effective activity for ESL learners, fostering self-directed engagement with text to uncover meaning. To ensure its success, SSR programs should use texts that capture students' interest and be guided by teachers. Students choose their reading materials based on content, difficulty level, and length, which naturally helps them activate their relevant background knowledge for better comprehension.

In addition to selecting appropriate texts (Carrel & Eisterhold, 2000), it is essential to address the readers themselves. These authors highlight the importance of providing background knowledge and previewing content before reading. They caution against having students engage with texts without preparation, as confronting linguistic or cultural challenges without context can lead to frustration and demotivation.

ESL readers often rely heavily on bottom-up processing, focusing on individual words rather than overall context. Thus, they benefit from familiar content and content previews to encourage more holistic, top-down processing. Illustrations can also support low-level readers by providing semantic context, reducing the focus on vocabulary and structural comprehension.

Carrel and Eisterhold (2000) emphasize the importance of listening to students' feedback on their reading materials, as this can reveal hidden comprehension difficulties. Teachers should respond not only to the accuracy of students' reading but also to their efforts and strategies. This attentive approach enables teachers to identify and address cultural and background knowledge gaps, helping students improve reading fluency in a foreign language.

Ur (2001) offers a list of ten tips contrasting effective and ineffective reading processes. Drawing on insights from Goodman, Brown, Carrel, and Eisterhold, these tips outline strategies for teaching reading in a foreign language classroom, emphasizing the roles of both the reader and the text. Ur's guidance helps teachers select diverse materials that enhance student interest and foster reading fluency in an ESL context.

Table 1: Theoretical Perspectives on Reading

Scholar/Author	Definition/Interpretation of Reading	Key Concepts	Publication Year
Jalolov	The process of extracting meaning (information) from written text.	Involves direct visual sensory input and cognitive processing.	2012

Berman & Bukhbinder	Reading as perceiving and grasping information expressed in graphic symbols.	Focuses on visual-cognitive aspects.	-
Kuchiboyev	The process of perceiving speech information in written symbols and understanding it.	Emphasizes understanding content through speech representation.	2020
Milrud	A visual-cognitive process where readers perceive written symbols through the visual sensory system.	Highlights mental processing of visual input.	2005
Goodman	Reading as a guessing game involving problem-solving, bottom-up, and top-down strategies.	Uncertainty, prior knowledge, and interactive processing.	1970
Brown	Advocated for interactive reading: a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches.	Integration of linguistic and cognitive processing for better comprehension.	2001

CONCLUSION

This article highlights various approaches and strategies to help students enhance their reading skills while building receptive vocabulary and grammar knowledge. It emphasizes the importance of integrating diverse genres to enrich learners' background knowledge, fostering improved reading abilities.

To meet the immediate goals in EFL/ESL reading instruction, teachers should balance the presumed background knowledge in the texts with the actual knowledge students possess (Carrell & Eisterhold, 2000). This can be achieved by adjusting the texts or addressing the reader's needs. However, the ultimate objective is to cultivate independent readers who can effectively engage with texts beyond the classroom. Whether for leisure, academic purposes, survival, or societal functions, such readers can extract meaningful insights from their reading experiences.

Table 2: Reading Strategies and Classroom Applications

Strategy/Approach	Description	Key Benefits	Reference
Extensive Reading	Encourages reading for enjoyment without focusing on every unfamiliar word.	Enhances language proficiency, vocabulary, spelling, and writing.	Krashen (1993)
Narrow Reading	Focuses on material related to a single topic or author.	Builds familiarity with vocabulary and structures, easing comprehension.	Krashen (1981)
Interactive Reading	Combines top-down and bottom-up approaches.	Improves comprehension by alternating between prediction and verification of meaning.	Brown (2001)
Language Experience Approach	Students create their own texts by dictating to the teacher.	Engages students with familiar content, reducing comprehension difficulties.	Rigg (1981)

Sustained Silent Reading	Students self-select and read texts silently with teacher guidance.	Promotes engagement, self-direction, and the activation of background knowledge.	Carrel & Eisterhold (2000)
Microskills for Reading	Includes skimming, scanning, deducing word meanings, and recognizing cohesive devices.	Develops efficiency and fluency in reading.	Brown (2001)
Pre-, During-, Post-Reading	Activities structured to prepare students, guide engagement, and reinforce comprehension.	Enhances understanding and retention of text content.	Brown (2001)

Reading is an inherently interactive process, combining students' prior knowledge with the content of the texts. Addressing culture-specific barriers in the classroom provides opportunities to develop new cultural schemata and expand learners' background knowledge, applicable both within and outside the EFL/ESL context.

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