

How to Improve Reading Skills



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Introduction

The reading skill is one of the four skills of learning the English language. It is not a passive activity, but an interactive one. It is mostly studied as an integrated skill with listening, speaking, and writing. The reading skill, in my opinion, should be emphasized a lot more for students in middle school and through to university level. The problem is that it has been used as an isolated approach for over 100 years in Thailand. Teaching reading skill effectively with three other skills- integrated approach, in my opinion, is the most suitable method for teaching English in Thailand, and preparing her people for the Asian Economic Community in 2015.

Two Types of Reading Skills: *Reading Aloud and Silent Reading*

The objective of teaching **reading aloud** is to improve the student's accuracy, and fluency of pronunciation. This teaching approach starts from reading words, phrases, or basic sentences to students and then telling them to practice producing those sounds until they feel confident. From step by step of such a technique, the reading aloud studied together with listening, speaking, and even writing skills would help students to absorb the language inherently and automatically. Language knowledge is an inherent ability of human beings. The ability to imitate various sounds is also human's potentiality, not capable in other species. The real objective of learning a language is to improve student's language competence and language performance; that is to say, the study of the system of rules, and the study of the actual sentences themselves, of the actual use of the language in really-life situation respectively. (Bradley S. Varshney. 1977). So, both are the ability to analyze language, detecting ambiguities, ignoring mistakes, understanding sentences, and producing entirely new sentences, whereas **silent reading** or **reading in the mind** is something different. The objective of practicing **reading in the mind** is to develop students' reading comprehension ability. **The silent reading** is well-studied and also can be an effective way for students to search for real world knowledge in books, magazines, newspapers, and even in worldwide websites online.

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Is the reading skill a big problem of Thai students?

Why do Thai students have the problems of reading English? Many Thai students, even though they spend at least 10 years learning English from their primary school to university level, cannot use English accurately, fluently and effectively. The reason is that mostly in English learning methods in Thailand, the teaching emphasizes only grammar, structure of sentence, and how to group those sentences into a paragraph. But the other three skills are not emphasized very much at all. And another problem is that all skills are isolated in teaching. Students hardly practice listening, speaking, and reading skills. In learning a language, we can start from one of them and relate it to one of the others. For example:

The teacher shows visual words through electrical media on the board or screen like this:

I like Thai food

I like Chinese food

I like Italian food.

The teacher reads it to students and has them repeat it. The teacher just says a word or phrase, “Vietnamese Food” and asks students, “What food do you like?”. All students say together, “I like Vietnamese food”. And before the end of the class, the teacher spends around 20 minutes to quiz the students’ writing ability by answering his/her questions about what has been practiced in the class. So, through the reading method like this students can improve all other learning skills as well.

Thai students are not quite very familiar with stresses, accents, intonations, prefixes and suffixes in English because there are none of these in the Thai language. Consequently, these confuse Thai students. When they speak English, they often forget to produce stresses, accents, or some other important English mechanics. For example, in a sentence, “**I have 20 students.**” some Thai students would say, “**I have 20 student(s).**” The suffix “s” is omitted. This is because of the habit of their mother tongue. And another example, a question, “**Do** you like Thai food?” the primary stress must occur above “**Do**” indicating the question, but Thai students mostly produce the same level of stress as the sounds in the Thai language. So, there are still plenty of problems for Thai students in learning the English language. To assist Thai students in solving these problems, teaching **reading aloud** through the integrated skill can help them and is also one of the effective ways to help them work through problems.

Another problem worth noting for Thai students is **silent reading or reading for understanding**. Many Thai students do not have enough vocabulary, and do not understand English structures well enough. They feel bored when looking for meanings of unknown words in a dictionary, they are not familiar enough with the structural relationship of words or phrases in a sentence or in a paragraph, and they do not know how to find the main idea of a paragraph, supporting details or how to scan or skim to find the information needed. Therefore, assignments of reading for understanding are one of the ways to help them improve.

(1) Reading aloud improvements:

1.1 Phonetics and pronunciation symbols

Reading is both an art and a science. For good English readers, he/she not only has to know how to use rising and falling stresses, sound speeches and other sound utterances, but also has to know sound production mechanisms; that is, phonology is the study of the system of speech sounds, and **the place of articulation**; that is, the positions in the mouth where each sound occurs and **manners of articulation**; that is, how the sounds are produced, for instance, the sounds /R/ in “Red” and /L/ in “Light”, of which sounds occur in different positions and also are produced in different sounds. Another example is a word ending in /Th /, with two different sounds like /θ/ in “Think” or /ð/ in “The.” Even though both sounds occur in the same position, but /θ/ sound is voiceless, whereas /ð/ sound is voiced. That is why they are produced as different sounds. These are some examples only to be concerned about school or university teachers. (Silp Rasri. 2002)

1.2 The techniques for improving reading aloud

Before starting the reading class, the teacher should teach students language mechanics likes stresses, accents, and intonations together with examples and tells students to repeat after him/her until they feel confident.

1.2.1 The step by step of teaching sound mechanics:

- Say a word (or words) to the students and tell them to repeat after the teacher
- Isolate and say stressed syllables of difficult words and here students repeat those too.
- Repeat whole phrases after the teacher.
- Repeat whole basic sentences after the teacher.

1.2.2 Introduce intonation to students by the use of greetings and simple “**Yes or No**” questions, that requires a simple response of “**Yes or No**” with falling or rising tone where necessary. Add other simple responses as the student’s knowledge of structure and vocabulary increases e.g., “**No, I am not**”, “**Yes, I am.**”

1.2.3 Sound linking: This is also a concern for Thai students. Sound linking is when the sounds of words run into another. Without understanding sound linking and good stress, words become unmanageable chunks, and fluency is obstructed. There are three ways of sound linking; that is, vowels linking consonants, consonants linking vowels, and vowels linking vowels. (Jones, Wheeler. 1994)

How to deal with the sound linking:

In teaching sound linking, there are many techniques. In this article only some of those are given as follows:

- ***Blending*** can also be used to link continuous consonants and vowel sounds, as in the phrase “this afternoon.” Here the *s* sounds /s/ of the word “this” is shared between both words.
- ***Co-articulation:*** overlapping sounds
 - o ***Co-articulation*** occurs when adjacent sounds overlap one another, causing a change in one or both sounds’ pronunciation. Two examples of co-articulation include nasal aspiration and lateral aspiration.
 - o ***Nasal aspiration*** occurs when the *d* sound /d/ links into the *n* sound /n/. The tongue moves into the position of the *d* sound, but the sound is not completed with the typical aspiration (release of air). Instead, the stopped air is released as an *n* sound. An example of nasal aspiration occurs in the phrase “**good news**”: the air is stopped as a *d* sound, but released as an *n* sound.
 - o ***Lateral aspiration*** is similar in concept to nasal aspiration in ‘that the air is stopped as a normal *d* sound /d/, but released as a different sound. In lateral aspiration, the *d* sound /d/ is released as an *l* sound /l/. In the phrase “bad luck,” the *d* sound /d/ links into the *l* sound /l/, and lateral aspiration occurs.

1.2.4 **The sentence intonation.** There are two types of intonations; that is, a falling one and a rising one. For those sentences ending in a full stop, the falling intonations are used. For example, **“I get up at six o’clock and then I take a shower for half an hour. And then I leave home for work at 8.30.”**

But a question mark sentence (?) in a written language indicates that it is a question. The rising intonation must be on question helping verbs like **“Do” “Did” “What”**, e.g., **“Do you like Thai food?” “Did you go to John’s birthday party last week?”**

1.3 Basic steps of teaching (BST)

This is also a helpful technique to improve student’s reading skills. BST is the way that the teacher teaches his/her students step by step for the purpose of accuracy, fluency, and speech of sounds uttered, as follow:

1.3.1 Reading for accuracy: The following are BST approaches.

- The teacher reads a short passage for students first.
- Then the teacher emphasizes a difficult word or phrase to students and tells them to repeat that word or phrase loudly.
- The teacher reads each sentence and tells each student to repeat it through the paragraphs.
- Then the students read the passage by themselves.
- And finally the teacher randomly selects a student to read to the class.
- The teacher checks and proofs students’ pronunciation and accuracy by listening to their reading about.

1.3.2 Reading for fluency: Students are randomly selected to read the whole passage, which is similar to the whole class reading. This is called the **Chain Number One** method. Student no. 1, 5, 8, 14, 13, are selected to read each sentence throughout a passage continuously and fluently. If one of them hits a stumbling block that means that chain is deficient, and they have to start that chain again.

1.3.3 Reading and look up: Students are taught to practice reading short phrases or sentences and remembering them until they are able to look up and utter those phrases or sentences confidently and naturally. It is like a TV news reporter, presenting the news on TV. Students must be assigned to do this often until they feel accustomed to do it. (Kanlaya Kaikaew. 2555)

1.3.4 Reading speech: Students must read a passage as quickly as they can, but should not skip over any words, and should not be too worried about accuracy of the word sounds. If they practice doing this often their reading speech will increase gradually and also it will help them speak English fluently and naturally.

1.4 The drilling approaches

Drilling is a technique that has been used in foreign language classrooms for many years. It was a key feature of audio-lingual method approaches to language teaching, which placed emphasis on repeating structural patterns through oral practice.

There are many kinds of drill techniques: According to Haycraft (John Haycraft . 1978), after a presentation and explanation of the new structure, students may use controlled practice in saying useful and correct sentence patterns in combination with appropriate vocabulary. These patterns are known as oral drills. They can be inflexible: students often seem to master a structure in drilling, but are then incapable of using it in other contexts. Furthermore, drills have several types in form:

1.4.1 The Repetition Drill

The teacher says models (the word or phrases) and the students repeat them. For example:

Teacher: It didn't rain, so I didn't have to take my umbrella

Students: It didn't rain, so I didn't have to take my umbrella

1.4.2 The Substitution Drill

The substitution drill can be used to practice different structures or vocabulary items (i.e. one or more words change during the drill)

For example:

Teacher: I go to school. He?

Students: He goes to school.

Teacher: They?

Students: They go to school.

1.4.3 The Question and Answer Drill

The teacher gives students practice with answering questions. The students should answer the teacher's questions very quickly. It is also possible for the teacher to let the students practice asking questions as well. This gives the students practice with the question pattern. For example:

Teacher: Does he go to school? Yes?

Students: Yes, he does.

Teacher: No?

Students: No, he does not.

(2) Strategies for improving silent reading

The Silent reading is a form of school-based recreational reading, or free voluntary reading, where students read silently in a designated time period every day in school. (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.) The objective of this skill is to encourage students to love to read, which the best way to develop them in intellectually. The following are some important strategies for improving silent reading.

2.1 *Identifying the topic and sub-topic:*

Reading is a complex process, especially for none-native speakers, so the first step to becoming a successful reader is to find the topic of a paragraph. What is a topic? The topic is a subject of that paragraph. It answers the question “What is a paragraph about?” E.g., the topic of words “tennis, golf, soccer and swimming” is “Sports”. And the topic of the words, “Nile, Amazon, Chaophraya, Maekong and Yangtze” is “rivers”. So, to understand the topic and sub-topic of a paragraph or passage is very helpful for the reader. He or she can predict what he or she is reading about in a paragraph or a passage.

2.2 *Identifying the main idea or topic sentence of a paragraph:*

A paragraph is a group of sentences with one topic. And a paragraph must have a main idea or a topic sentence (the meaning of a topic sentence is the main idea, whereas the structure of that sentence is called the topic sentence). The main idea is the author’s most important point about the topic. So, it answers the questions, “What is the main point the author is making about the topic?” The silent reader before reading a whole paragraph must find the main idea of that first paragraph. This is to find the important point of that paragraph. It might not be only in the first sentence of a paragraph but it also might be in the last sentence or even in the middle of the paragraph.

How to teach students to find a main idea, first the teacher hands his/her students a piece of an easy paragraph for the students to read and then tells them to find its main idea and gist which is the main idea of word or phrases or a sentences which is often repeated in the paragraph. For example:

The teacher tells students to read the following paragraph and tells them to find the main idea of it, too.

“She is young. Her shoes are old. She wears them to work. She goes to work five days a week. She loves her work. She is a waitress. She works at a restaurant. The restaurant is near her home. She walks to the restaurant. She stands up all day long. She is young and strong. But her shoes are not good. They are old. She saw an ad in the paper. All shoes were on sale at the shoe store. She walked into the store. She looked around. She saw some black shoes. They looked good. She tried them on. They were very comfortable. They felt good. They were only \$25. She paid cash. She wore them home. She felt good. She was ready for work the next day.” So, in this paragraph it is easy for students to find main idea; “old shoes”, which is often said in the paragraph, indicating the main idea of a paragraph. So, the main idea of this paragraph is “**Her shoes are old.**”

2.3 *Supporting details*

This is also an important strategy to make the main idea clear. It can be examples, facts, explanations, or reasons. It is to give the reader more information about the main idea. It tells who, what, when, where, why, how, how much, or how many. For example:

Main idea: “ I like playing all kinds of **sports.**”

Supporting details: Football, tennis, badminton, hockey.

The supporting sentences means to the sentences that give more information about the main idea, or topic sentence. To understand supporting details the reader can get more details of the paragraph both grammatically and semantically.

2.4 *Previewing and predicting*

Both are also important skills for readers to learn for silent reading. Before reading a paragraph, a good reader should be able to predict what the paragraph is going to be about. One way to make good predictions is to look for clues about the topic by looking over the whole reading first. This is called previewing. But predicting is an educated guess about what you are going to read.

2.5 *Skimming and scanning*

Both skimming and scanning are to find the general topic of the article and specific information needed in the article respectively. For example:

“**Opposition won’t join amnesty talks**”

Published: 12 Mar 2013 at 14.22

Online news:

“The opposition whips on Tuesday agreed their parties would not take part in any amnesty talks if they are again invited to participate by Deputy House Speaker Charoen Chankomol, Democrat MP Jurin Laksanavisit said. Mr Jurin, chief of the opposition whip, said if the House of Representatives decided to deliberate amnesty bills there would be fresh conflict throughout the country. Instead of pushing for an amnesty law, the government should concentrate on delivering its annual report to parliament and the people as required by the constitution, he said.

Mr Jurin said the opposition would on Wednesday query the government in the House about Defence Minister Sukumpol Suwanatat’s meeting with Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Tea Banh at Preah Vihear temple and the new round of the government’s rice-pledging scheme.” (Bangkok Post, Mar 12, 2013)

A student before scanning specific information has to discover what generally the news talks about. Here it is about the opposition whips, opposing the amnesty talks. This technique is called **skimming**. And if he/she wants to know who talks to whom or what or when it is about, how many, how much, etc. it is not necessary to read the whole paragraph, he/she can go to and find that information directly. It is called **scanning technique**. The following are some clues for both skimming and scanning approaches.

Skimming technique:

- Read the first few sentences for general idea
- Read the last few sentences. These are always summarizing sentences
- Find the key words given as the clues in the text.

Scanning technique:

- Find specific information: name, date, time, what, where, etc. in the paragraph.
- Moving your eyes rapidly across the paragraph, ignoring the words or phrases not needed until you find the information you want.

So, in the passage above, one can use both previewing and scanning. For skimming, the general idea of the passage is about the opposition opposing the amnesty talk. And for scanning, the information the reader needs is only to find who is the Deputy House Speaker, and who is chief of the opposition whip,

2.6 The context clues:

They are the clues for reader to guess the meanings of the words or phrases which are unfamiliar to them. There are four context clues, which are:

definition clues, comparison clues, contrast clues, and example clues. A good reader should know how to guess the context (the words or sentences around the unfamiliar word) to find the meaning of those words. He/she does not need to open a dictionary for every word.

2.7 The signal words:

The signal words are to help the reader to know how the paragraph is organized by the author and helps the reader read that paragraph comprehensively. Signal words or phrases are: after, another, as soon as, at last, at the same time, before, finally, first, last, later, next, now, second, today, then, and then, when, and while.

2.8 Fact and Opinion

In each paragraph, there are both facts and opinions of the readers. Facts are statements which can be proved to be true, and opinions are statement that describes someone's feeling or beliefs about the topic. The reader should know while reading which facts are and which opinions are.

(Ready to read now: Karen Blanchard, Christine Root: 2005)

(3) 5 Tips for reading loudly and silent reading

Many people do not read well because of poor silent reading habits. Correcting these poor reading practices and replacing them with good reading practices will improve both reading speed and reading comprehension. You can become a better reader by practicing these tips.

3.1 Posture and attitude. The reader has to improve his/her reading posture and adjust his/her attitude for relaxation and calm his/her mind to read the passage effectively.

3.2 Concentration. The reader has to concentrate in what he/she is reading.

3.3 Reading rhythm. The reader has to improve the reading rhythm, moving his/her eyes from fixation to fixation and focusing on the center of the page with peripheral vision to view the words to the left and right with reading loudly or reading in the mind.

3.4 Interactively. The reader has to improve his/her interactively. A good silent reader always has a two-way conversation with the paragraph author. He/she might ask and answer about general topics, specific information, etc.

3.5 Private atmosphere. For silent reading comprehension, the reader should find a private atmosphere such as in a library, a park, or even in a private room in his/her house. This is because the reader, for silent reading for comprehension, has to concentrate on what he/she is reading to understanding it profoundly. (Ann. Logsdon. 2012)

(4) The important factors for teaching the reading skill effectively

Some techniques and strategies as said above are an only guideline for the teacher to improve his/her student's reading skills; reading aloud and silent reading. There are still many important techniques and strategies for improvement of student's reading ability that can be found in many text books. Anyway, apart from the theories of the experts, the four factors below are also considerably organized and notable.

4.1 Class size. The class size should be medium, 20 or less. If the class size is too big, the teacher has to work hard to control the class and evaluate students in both their reading accuracy and fluency, and reading assailment from silent reading.

4.2 Visual aids. The reading class without visual aids, like visualized CDs, electronic media, power points with multi-media, and even short movies, would be a boring class. To encourage students to study joyfully and effectively, these supporting aids are necessary.

4.3 Reading materials. Good and interesting reading materials must be sufficient for students.

4.4 Qualified teachers. "Qualified teachers" here means a native speaker who majored in English or even a non-native speaker, who is able to use English effectively, and is also qualified with teaching experience at the required level. IT competence is also an important qualification necessary for teaching English to Thai students.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, the reading skill is one of four integrated skills in learning a language. The teacher can choose any of them as the pioneer, leading to the integration of other three skills. In my opinion, English learning approach in Thailand should be changed. The grammar – translation method, used for over 100 years, indicates that it cannot develop Thai student's English competence and English performance. So, the pioneering method, as suggested in this article, is teaching English through reading skill at first start, And the teacher can ingrate it with other rest of skills. In this approach, the teacher can start with reading aloud, following some techniques given above, and silent reading when students are quite well – improved in vocabulary, basic sentences by assigning them to read easy reading materials. Reading aloud focuses on accuracy and fluency of using English, whereas silent reading focuses on the knowledge in the text. It is a key to open endless worldwide knowledge to the reader. If we want to prepare our students to be smart for coming AEC and for their dreamed career, let's change our teaching methodology, by starting from reading skill ,integrating it with listening, speaking and writing skills instead of using the usual ways proved that it cannot help Thai students be better in English in all kinds of communicative purposes.

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