Reading comprehension class at AU, English IV Level

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Abstract:
As the title suggests, the author goes through his own experiences of teaching 'Reading Comprehension' at English IV level - offers an account of odds facing him at performing the task and then suggests ways how to overcome them out of prevailing customary practices, and his own experiences and insights.

The setting is reading Comprehension class for Students of English IV at Au. It's quintessentially Thai context since all my students are from Thai background. I've no intentions at all of sounding pedagogically high-pitched or hyperbolic laden with myriad scholastic references. Therefore, I'd like to plunge headlong into the very fundamentals of the situation at hand. A few things definitely surprise me a lot - for instance, in most educational institutions we're so much concerned about 'what' to teach while there exists clearly a tendency to ignore 'how' to teach a particular language aspect. Surely we need first to discuss at length the very urgent issue of 'how'. So, I'm not so much bothered what I'm assigned to teach - most importantly how to accomplish the real objectives is what superimposes my thoughts - even gives my mind jery upheavals; precisely what strategies are likely to prove most effective in a specific situation is what I'm concerned with primarily.

In current times we hear so much on the importance of a 'Brain storming' session prior to taking up an activity requiring comprehension, reflection and even some degree of imagination. The underlying idea is to awaken an interest - compel groups to think, even interact with the teacher or, between groups in a class - an essential step toward communicative approach. In a 'Reading Comprehension' class this might serve as a potential starter. Key issues in the passage may be centrally unfolded through a chain of dialogues between the teacher and the students but not really exposing everything threadbare. Answers need not be offered straightaway. Soon after this initial arousal, may be the teacher sets students to the task of finding the specific answers to the given questions. The session may be carried on further, the given questions analyzed and understood by students - there needs to be quite a lot of ingenuity in framing questions, and even shooting them in class, maybe at times piece by piece tilting the imagination of students - the entire aim is geared at eliciting answers from students. Sometimes the
question might need to be broken down into fragments – it all depends on the situation in class.

What role does a teacher need to take while teaching ‘Reading Comprehension’? or, he needs to play no part – simply offer them passage after passage. There can be an alternative way out which is to allow them to sit in manageable groups, set them to the task of reading all by themselves and let them come out with some plausible answers. Let the leader of the group announce the answers preferably in simple words of their own. Should we give them unlimited course of time, or fix a time-frame? Yes, of course, fix a flexible timing depending on their efficiency. Whether we call this an activity of silent reading, or as Browning J calls it—a potent way of inducing faster reading habit, it comes to the same which is so very important to gain proficiency in the language, and lead students gradually to the benchmark of 200 words approximately per minute. In a situation like this we need to give them first the questions—even focus on them in some detail as to what precisely they ought to be looking for while reading the passage. Equipped thus they might proceed with a fair degree of confidence. Many a times what I’ve experienced is that, the true sense of the given question eludes their grasp caused primarily by difficult vocabulary or unclear usage of phrases in the question itself. Whatever—it’s extremely important to use words/phrases in the question carefully so that there isn’t even the slightest of vagueness.

However, engaging students to the task of silent reading without any prior engagements would leave the teacher wholly passive or inactive in the classroom. Not that I’m dissuading the teacher from practising this system in the classroom; instead, I certainly prefer a full-fledged oral discussion beforehand—both the teacher and the students participating in thorough vocal terms at the beginning stage or prior to setting students to any writing task on ‘Reading Comprehension’. The advantage is—they’ll be better prepared to face such tasks later. Whether it’s the global view of the passage, or inferential implications, students are likely to develop the skills required to tackle a given passage on their own.

Breaking out in this manner in teaching procedure presupposes communicative approach – some discussion, interaction, talking, dramatisation of notions etc. fill the classroom with some noise creating a vibrant, learning atmosphere. I feel this kind of noise (both sense and nonsense may be involved) is a healthy sign that something is taking place, and not that the teacher alone is assuming an alarming, all-knowing presence in the classroom. Or else, merely setting them to the task of silent reading day in and day out can, I’m afraid, might even produce some kind of soporific effect. And precisely, that’s the bane in this context. Thai students are shy, submissive and inhibited by nature refusing to open their mouths except to smile or murmur some words with a distinct dose of politeness. In short, I’m against this kind of situation because oral activities do have a beneficial impact on their writing ability as well. And this helps them to learn the language faster. I did try on this method, but often I felt handicapped. First, I was mistaken that I wasn’t really teaching anything—perhaps just talking light-heartedly. Secondly,
the amount of enthusiasm and confidence required for this kind of activity was somehow missing in the classroom. Nevertheless, we need to ponder on this issue.

To be able to tackle a reading passage firsthand I’ve suggested a 3-step formula:

**Step I** - Read, read faster, just read, try and get the main idea, ignore difficult words—just don’t pay attention to words which seem difficult to you; a time-limit may be given in advance to prevent slow reading or, indulging in any kind of rambling thoughts.

**Step II** - Now, stop. Look at the question underneath the passage. The question has 2 parts in it; understand the question thoroughly. If need be, ask the teacher for a clarification. Make sure you understand the question.

**Step III** - Now, go over the passage again, but this time slowly, and you can underline with the pencil line or lines that might represent the answer you’re seeking. As for the second part of the question asking for your opinion, the hint already is given in the passage. But, you’re free to differ, and in that case make sure you’ve 2-3 valid points.

The total evolution is far from being over. Two paragraphs need to be written out in limited number of words. Norms of paragraph writing need to be maintained such as using a topic sentence, concluding sentence, explaining briefly in the middle, using Transition words/phrases where necessary etc. All these really don’t pose big problems—the serious problem emerges from the fact that students tend to copy sentences verbatim from the given passage while writing their answers. To a certain degree I may allow—if it concerns only some words, particularly key words, or certain important fragments of sentences, certain phrases or expressions—but not entire sentences, or paragraph chunks.

To me, this tendency of students is a display of their innate fear of the language, and no amount of strict action or threat can really deter them from doing so. And precisely for that reason, I insist on students’ vocal participation in class—as much as we can so that the fear is shed. If they show confidence while speaking I’m sure the same confidence will be carried onto whatever they’re producing in writing as well.

The million-dollar question finally is, how to get students really attuned to the interactive way of learning the language—no matter whether we offer them a passage for reading comprehension, or whatever.

Another aspect plaguing their written answers is chaotic grammar. At one time, in a sentence they introduce multiple main subjects with multiple verbs—the obvious result is distorted meanings. Sometimes the crack in the meaning happens because of unsuitable vocabulary, sometimes one sentence may contain 2-3-4 sentences with no effort to split them using (; or .) All sorts of freaks can be expected. Minor mistakes of
prepositions or articles can be overlooked. But, if mistakes verge on confused meanings—well, something has to be done.

**Probably the way out:**

Teachers should encourage a regular reading habit through homework, making students familiar with usage, collocations, basic sentence structures, tenses, syntax, and by offering them examples of sentence patterns in a graded manner at all levels of English. Appropriate resource materials are available in the market. Some kind of testing and evaluation may as well be considered.

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