Vol. 1, Issue 2

ENHANCING READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS AMONG B2-LEVEL EFL LEARNERS THROUGH TASK-BASED LEARNING

Rakhimnazarova Samira Jasurbek qizi

Supervisor: Tuxtaxujayeva Madina Ulug‘bek qizi

Rahinazarovasamira@gmail.com

madinatux9757@gmail.com

Abstract. Reading comprehension is one of the most difficult skills for EFL learners at the upper-intermediate (B2) level. At this stage the texts become longer, more abstract and more formal, and many learners can read every word but still cannot explain what the text means. This article discusses how Task-Based Learning (TBL) can help B2 learners understand texts better. It uses ideas from three books on reading comprehension (Oakhill, Cain,&Elbro, 2015; Spears, 2013; LearningExpress, 2005) and from the main TBL scholars (Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). The article describes the techniques used in a task cycle, gives a sample lesson, and suggests simple ways to assess learners’ progress. The main idea is that learners understand a text more deeply when they use it to complete a real purpose, not only to answer questions after reading.

Keywords: reading comprehension, task-based learning, B2 level, EFL learners, reading strategies, inference, vocabulary in context

Introduction

Many teachers notice the same problem in their B2 classes. Learners read aloud well, but when the teacher asks “What is the text about?” or “What does the writer think?”, the answers are short and unclear. This means that the problem is not reading the words. The problem is understanding the meaning behind the words.

Oakhill, Cain and Elbro (2015) explain that reading comprehension is important not only for understanding a text but also for success in education and work (p. 1). They

also say that it is a complex task that needs “the orchestration of many different cognitive skills” (p. 1). In other words, a learner must use vocabulary, grammar, background knowledge, memory and thinking at the same time.

Traditional reading lessons often follow one pattern: students read a text and then answer questions. In this pattern, the learner is mostly checked, not taught. Task-Based Learning offers another way. In TBL, learners work on a task with a clear goal, such as solving a problem, making a decision or preparing a short presentation. The text becomes a tool for completing the task, so learners read more carefully and with more purpose.

The aim of this article is to show how TBL can be used to develop the reading comprehension of B2 learners. The article answers two questions:

1. Which skills do B2 learners need in order to understand a text well?

2. How can a task cycle help learners develop these skills?

It should be said clearly that this is a conceptual and practical article. It does not present experimental results. The three main books were written mostly for first-language children, college students and test preparation, so their ideas are adapted here for EFL learners at B2 level.

Theoretical background

Oakhill et al. (2015) describe reading with the Simple View of Reading, which was first proposed by Gough and Tunmer (1986, as cited in Oakhill et al., 2015, p. 2). According to this view, reading has two main parts: word reading (decoding) and language comprehension. The authors explain that reading ability depends on the product of the two parts, not just the sum, so if one part is zero, reading is impossible (p. 3). They also show that in the early years decoding is the main difference between good and poor readers, but later language comprehension becomes more important (p. 4). B2 learners are usually past the basic decoding stage, so most of their problems come from the second part: understanding language and text.

In TBL the lesson is built around tasks, not around a list of grammar points. Willis (1996) describes a framework with three stages: a pre-task, a task cycle (task, planning and report), and a language focus stage at the end. Ellis (2003) explains that a real task focuses mainly on meaning, has some kind of gap (for example missing information or different opinions), and ends with a clear outcome that is not just correct language. Nunan (2004) separates real-world tasks, which copy things people do outside the classroom, from pedagogic tasks, which are made for learning. In reading lessons, both kinds can be used, for example choosing a product after reading reviews, or preparing a summary for a classmate who missed the text.

This section describes the techniques that can be combined with TBL. Each technique comes from one of the three books and fits one stage of the task cycle.

3.6 Inference and monitoring questions (task and report stages). The teacher gives questions that need learners to read between the lines. Oakhill et al. (2015) warn that learners with comprehension problems especially struggle when they must combine information from different parts of a text (p. 25), so questions should not only ask for facts from one sentence. Text structure and transitions (language focus stage). Learners find signal words such as first, then, however and as a result, and use them to understand and to rebuild the order of ideas (LearningExpress, 2005, pp. 54-57; Oakhill et al., 2015, p. 15).

Vocabulary notebook and cloze exercises (language focus and follow-up). Spears (2013) recommends vocabulary note cards with the word, the sentence where it appeared, the definition and the word family (pp. 3-4), and a cloze test in which about every sixth word is removed so that learners use grammar and meaning to fill the gaps (p. 7).

The lesson uses one authentic or semi-authentic B2 text of about 600-800 words, for example an article about how teenagers use social media. The final outcome of the task is a short group recommendation that is presented to the class.

Stage 1. Pre-task (15 min). Learners discuss the topic, predict the content from the title and headings, and learn 5 key words. Technique: prediction and skimming (3.1).

Task (25 min). In groups (jigsaw), each group reads one part of the text, underlines key ideas and guesses new words from context. Technique: marking up and context clues (3.2, 3.3). Planning (15 min). Groups write the main idea of their part and prepare a two-minute summary and a recommendation. Technique: main idea and topic sentence (3.4). Report (15 min). Groups present; classmates ask questions and decide which statements are facts and which are opinions. Technique: fact and opinion, inference (3.5, 3.6). Language focus (15 min). Learners study connectives and text structure in the text, complete a short cloze task and update their vocabulary notebooks. Technique: text structure, cloze, note cards (3.7, 3.8). Reflection (5 min). Learners say which strategy helped them most. Technique: monitoring.

In this plan the learners always have a reason to read. They do not read only to answer the teacher’s questions, but to give information to others and to make a decision together. Assessment should show not only the learner’s score but also the reason for a problem. Oakhill et al. (2015) separate formative assessment, which guides future teaching, from summative assessment, which only measures achievement (p. 27). In a TBL class, formative assessment is more useful. The same authors compare question types (pp. 31-34):

Open-ended questions are the most sensitive, but they take time and depend on the learner’s speaking or writing ability. Multiple-choice and true/false questions are quick and suitable for large groups, but the answer is shown in the options, so learners can guess an inference they did not make themselves. Cloze tasks can test connectives, vocabulary or background knowledge, depending on which words are removed.

Oakhill et al. (2015) also report that in the classic cloze procedure a reader who can restore at least about 54% of the words can understand the text easily, while a score below about 44% means that the text is too difficult for independent study (Bormuth,

1967, as cited in Oakhill et al., 2015, p. 32). Teachers can use this idea to check whether a chosen B2 text has the right level. A simple rubric with four points (main idea, supporting details, inference, vocabulary in context) can also be used for the group report.

Benefits. First, learners read with a clear purpose, so they pay more attention to meaning. Second, group work gives learners a chance to explain, to disagree and to correct each other, which supports comprehension monitoring. Third, the strategies (marking up, context clues, main idea) can be used again with any text, which helps learners become independent readers. This is in line with Spears (2013), who says that students improve their reading by reading, not only by learning about strategies (p. xvii). Some learners may use their first language too much during group work. Large classes make it hard for the teacher to listen to every group. Choosing the right text is also difficult: if the text is too easy, learners are not challenged, and if it is too hard, they stop reading. Finally, tasks need careful design, because a task that is only a disguised exercise does not satisfy the TBL principle of a real outcome (Ellis, 2003).

Conclusion

B2 learners usually can read words but still struggle to understand texts as a whole. The three books discussed here show that comprehension depends on vocabulary, sentence understanding, inference, monitoring and knowledge of text structure. Task-Based Learning gives these skills a natural place in the lesson: the pre-task builds a framework for the mental model, the task and planning stages let learners use strategies, the report stage requires them to explain and defend their understanding, and the language focus stage fixes important vocabulary and structure. Future classroom research could compare a TBL group with a traditional group and measure the change in their reading scores.

References

1. Ellis, R. (2003). Task-based language learning and teaching. Oxford University Press.

2. LearningExpress. (2005). Reading comprehension success in 20 minutes a day (3rd ed.). LearningExpress.

3. Nunan, D. (2004). Task-based language teaching. Cambridge University Press.

4. Oakhill, J., Cain, K.,&Elbro, C. (2015). Understanding and teaching reading comprehension: A handbook. Routledge.