READING SKILLS ： BEYOND THE READING RACE

(What is it that students don’t understand when they say they don’t?)

When reading, what exactly is it that students don’t understand when they say they don’t understand? What is it that blocks comprehension when the grammar and vocabulary are clear? Why do coursebook comprehension questions or vocabulary matching exercises often fail to help? By looking at texts at sentence and paragraph level and by focusing on the process of reading as well as content, we’ll explore ways of helping our students become more proficient readers.

In this workshop we’ll be considering a variety of problems that students encounter when reading different types of texts, independently of the level, and we’ll look at ways to help them overcome these difficulties and read more effectively.

We will focus on intensive reading, dealing with texts at sentence or paragraph level since this is where most of the problems lie: e.g. students sometimes find it hard to understand long isolated sentences when doing a grammar exercise, or to get the right word to fill in a gap in a cloze test. This is not necessarily due to unknown vocabulary or grammar structures, but rather to a failure to read the text properly. We’ll illustrate this point with a number of examples.

We will cast a critical eye on reading activities in textbooks, which are not always helpful: they tend to concentrate on introductory questions (before) and general comprehension questions or reasons for correct/incorrect answers (after), and on multiple choice and vocabulary matching exercises (which are often no more than guessing games). But there is usually very little on the process of reading itself.

Based on a variety of texts extracted from coursebooks currently in use, we’ll discuss which features of written speech make students say ‘I don’t understand’. These include: punctuation and intonation patterns, word order (especially when several adjectives are grouped together before a noun), word type (words that can alternatively be nouns/verbs/adjectives depending on context), words that can be omitted (e.g. ‘that’ in relative clauses), words that should be read together (e.g. phrasal verbs), reference (use of pronouns and determiners), etc.

Finally, we will explore ways in which teachers can help their students to develop strategies for comprehension which will enable them to understand a sentence or paragraph even if they do not know the meaning of some words. These strategies include: paying attention to punctuation and natural pauses, dissecting long sentences into meaningful chunks of language, linking reference words to their objects, finding the main verb and its related
subject, identifying grammar structures and word types, finding synonyms, being aware of cultural references, etc. Throughout this part of the session we’ll stress the importance of reading aloud, and reading tapescripts when listening (often considered the ‘black sheep’ of classroom activities), in order to familiarize students with the natural flow of the language and help them ‘see’ why certain groups of words make sense together.

Handouts containing a summary of the problems and suggested solutions will be given to the participants of the workshop.

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