

# *Teaching Reading for English as a Foreign Language Learners: Insights from Psychological and Social Perspectives*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores strategies for teaching reading to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, with a focus on psychological and social perspectives. The target students discussed are second-year Chinese university students majoring in Computer and Engineering. While they demonstrate good discipline and cooperation, they lack social experiences, practical English output abilities, cognitive processes and background knowledge. This paper highlights key factors that influence reading, such as motivation and prior experiences, and emphasizes the necessity of connecting classroom activities with real-world experiences. The chosen teaching material *NEW HORIZONS III* (4<sup>th</sup> edition) centres on workplace topics and aligns with language, content and social justice objectives. The teaching practices involve pre-class, in-class, and post-class activities designed to activate interest, impart linguistic and content knowledge and assess learning outcomes. The paper aims to cultivate students' positive work values, cross-cultural understanding and critical thinking skills through a comprehensive and practical approach to reaching instruction.

## 1. Introduction

For most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, reading is a difficult input process as it requires not only sound foundation skills but is also influenced by other mental factors, such as concentration, patience, cognitive abilities and so forth. Meanwhile, for most Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) teachers, teaching reading in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms is challenging as the reading process may not be monitored directly and obviously. Teachers can only estimate students' reading abilities based on their reading performances. However, reading is like an interactive dialogue, constructing meaning between a text and a reader<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, understanding how the reading process works helps teachers and students improve their reading teaching and learning in an effective way.

This paper begins by describing the target students and analyzing their characteristics. It illustrates how the teachers employ reading activities to help students engage in social actions and connect with the real world, building on an understanding of the reading processes. This paper aims to provide an example of reading teaching practice from psychological and social perspectives.

## 2. Analysis of Target Students

Analysing the target students helps teachers personalise teaching activities and adjust teaching procedures in order to achieve effective teaching. First, the target students are second-year students who are between 18 to 20 years old at a Chinese university. They are good in discipline and have cooperation abilities when teachers implement teaching activities. However, they lack social experiences as they may not have lots of chances and opportunities to connect with society, which results from a larger social factor – it is believed that in China, students should solely focus on their studies during their study life regardless of other experiences. Therefore, it is necessary to connect the classroom with the real world to help students get out of the ivory tower and understand society.

Second, they are specialized in Computer and Engineering. Their English language proficiency is at level 4 or 5 in the China Standards of English (CSE), equivalent to a total score of 4.5-5.5 in IELTS and a total score of 37-57 in TOEFL. In terms of language skills, most Chinese students are good at input skills but need more improvement in output skills, including speaking, writing and translating. Output-oriented activities are a catalyst for input. Therefore, output-oriented teaching activities should not be ignored and neglected.

Third, given that the national language and the first language (L1) of most students and teachers is Chinese, the language environment of the ELT classroom is not rigid monolingual but multilingual and translanguaging for both teachers and students to comprehend each other in an efficient way. Also, one of the teaching and learning objectives is to cultivate students' cross-cultural abilities. Using shared language to introduce cultural-related words, information, and knowledge is beneficial to students in comprehending and experiencing them.

## 3. The Understanding of the Reading

Understanding what reading is, what reading processes are, and what factors may influence reading helps teachers design and implement teaching practice in ELT classrooms. First, reading is an integrated action of text extraction, appropriate cognitive processes and background knowledge<sup>[2]</sup>. Reading is not simply a process of extracting and acquiring knowledge through visual aids but also a complicated and inner process of analyzing and interpreting various kinds of knowledge, such as topic knowledge, linguistic knowledge, social knowledge and so forth.

There are two essential reading processes, which are lower-level process and higher-level process. The lower-level process is a decoding process including word recognition, syntactic parsing and semantic proposition encoding while the higher-level process is a comprehending process consisting of text-model forming, situation-model building, executive-control processing and strategy applying<sup>[2]</sup>. The lower-level processes concentrate more on concrete subjects such as words, grammar and sentences, while the higher-level processes focus more on abstract experiences in life. These processes collaborate to enhance reading comprehension. The objective is for target students to improve their abilities to fluently and effectively utilize both process levels.

Considering the factors influencing reading may help teachers design and redesign their teaching activities before, during and after the class. Some major factors related to psychological and social aspects are motivations and experiences. In terms of the motivation for reading, self-motivated students with positive emotions about learning are more willing to learn and cooperate with the teacher, resulting in a more positive effect on the learning outcomes<sup>[3]</sup>. The experiences related to the topic of the reading texts activate students' prior knowledge to help them comprehend and interpret the reading materials. Thus, activating students' motivations for reading and connecting their experiences related to the reading topic are the purposes of designing teaching activities of reading.

#### 4. Teaching Practices of Reading

The teaching material is *NEW HORIZONS III* (4<sup>th</sup> edition), which was published in March 2023. It has been selected for college ELT materials by various universities for college ELT due to its alignment with the College English Teaching Guidelines (2020 version). The elicited example is unit four *When work is a pleasure*, which focuses on the topic of the workplace. This unit is comprised of three sections, each containing a distinct passage. Text A titled *Will you be a worker or a labourer?* begins by defining the terms work, labour and play, before contrasting the differences of being a worker versus being a labourer. It concludes by posing the question “will you be a worker or a labourer?” Text B, *The joy of a prideful tradition*, presents a dialogue between the author and a shoemaker who has dedicated his entire life to making shoes and takes great pride in his work. Text C is a story from China, titled *Glassware on fire*, which narrates the story of the inheritor of intangible cultural heritage who has devoted his life to the art of glassware.

There are three sets of overlapping learning objectives: language, content, and social justice. Language objectives are to recognize, comprehend and use words and sentence structures to discuss the choice of occupation and to write an essay (120-150 words) by applying the point-by-point pattern about “being lying flat or a rat race”. Content objectives are to explain the differences between the terms “worker” and “labourer” and to analyse the differences between the lifestyle “lying flat” and “rat race”. Social justice objectives are to develop students’ positive values regarding work and self-development, to cultivate good work attitudes and ethics, and to strengthen their sense of belonging and warm love towards traditional Chinese cultures and values, particularly in preserving, inheriting and spreading them<sup>[4]</sup>.

The teaching activities are designed to achieve these pre-set teaching objectives. The teaching practices consist of three sections: pre-class, in-class, and post-class. Pre-class activities aim to activate students’ interests and prior knowledge about the unit topic, serving as the basis for in-class activities that focus on teaching and learning linguistic and content knowledge. Post-class activities involve assessing teaching and learning outcomes. Before the class, students are required to complete four mini-tasks for section A, including discussing future career choices, participating in an online survey about the top three elements when seeking jobs, watching an online mini-lecture on comparison and contrast, and completing a checklist of two output tasks. The first two tasks are intended to encourage students to express their career choices and plan for their dream jobs in advance. The third task is designed to impart new linguistic knowledge, specifically focusing on the concepts and two common patterns of comparison and contrast. The final task aims to help students identify their academic goals and tailor their learning plan by familiarizing themselves with the specified output tasks. Another task for sections B and C involves dubbing an edited video about Yingge dance (Hero’s song), a form of Chinese folk dance originating from the Ming Dynasty, from *Inheritors* produced by the China Global Television Network (CGTN). This activity aligns with the goal of promoting understanding and preservation of traditional Chinese cultures, spreading Chinese stories in English, and addressing the lack of Chinese culture representation in ELT classrooms.

At the beginning of the class, which focuses on section A, students will be prompted to speculate on the results of the online survey and attempt to analyse the underlying reasons. When discussing their dream jobs, the students mentioned occupations related to their majors, such as programming and engineering, as they hoped to apply their professional knowledge in a practical setting. According to the survey results, the top three factors the students would consider are salaries, working hours, and achievements. They prioritized salaries as they ensure individuals’ basic needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing. Working hours and achievements are the second and third considerations respectively, corresponding to psychological needs and self-fulfilment needs. It is suggested that students prioritize personal development and satisfaction, rather than becoming solely focused on monetary gains. The section following the leading is about analyzing the text structure – the point-by-point pattern. Students skim and scan text A, filling in the missing information to comprehend the overall structure and the main ideas of each part. These include the definitions of work, labour, and

play, the contrast between being a worker and being a labourer, and the decision between the two. Once the overall structure is understood, the focus shifts to the second part and its paragraph structure – the point-by-point pattern. With this specific focus in mind, students should draw upon the knowledge learned from the online mini-lecture prior to class to complete the output-oriented tasks afterwards effectively. After the activation of linguistic knowledge, the phenomenon of Buddha-like youngsters – youngsters with casual and calm mindsets – will be introduced. This introduction serves as a transition to the next activity, in which students will be required to apply the point-by-point pattern they have learned to analyse and contrast two social phenomena, the “lying flat” and the “rat race”. They will share their ideas on choosing between lifestyles. Through this application and discussion, students will develop and enhance their critical thinking abilities while also adjusting and refining their values and work ideologies. Notably, students will realize that these two lifestyles do not exist on a simple yes-or-no spectrum, but rather form a continuum, encouraging everyone to seek a dynamic balance.

In the class focusing on sections B and C, students are required to skim and scan the text B and summarise the functions of signal words. For example, words such as “however”, “in contrast”, and “on the other hand” indicate comparison and contrast. Words like “because”, “thus”, “so that”, and “consequently” signal cause and effect relationships. Through this activity, students learn not only the linguistic knowledge specified in signal words, but also the importance of categorizing and summarizing. The final activity in the class is an open discussion on the necessity of inheriting Chinese traditions and values, allowing students to connect their personal experiences with the real world.

After class, there will be two output-oriented assignments: an individual essay and a group report on happiness at work. Both assignments will involve presenting in class. Teachers-students collaborative assessment will be applied to assess, aiming to let students find out and summarise their own strong points and weaknesses of the essay by themselves.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on teaching reading to EFL learners, highlighting psychological and social perspectives. Reading is a complex process, where cannot be observed directly. Teaching and learning reading is challenging for teachers and learners respectively. Therefore, this paper provides a practical case of teaching reading for EFL learners, emphasizing the importance of personalized teaching and connecting the classroom with the real world and hoping to give some ideas for TESOL teachers in their teaching practice.

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