In a previous post, we looked at some of the areas we might explore when training our learners in bottom-up strategies for listening. In this post, I’d like to do the same for reading.

(We take it as read that reading fluency depends on the learners’ general linguistic competence. So all of the following discussion assumes that any training programme will also include work on building up this, especially vocabulary.)

It was suggested previously that top-down approaches (where the learners use their knowledge of the world to help understand a text) can provide enjoyable ways “into” a text, especially for the reluctant or weaker reader. These might lead into useful work on sub-skills such as skimming and scanning.

Bottom-up approaches, on the other hand, encourage the learners to develop their ability to understand the text at a deeper or more intensive level. These are designed to help learners “decode” the text in front of them and, crucially, to give them transferable skills to allow them to comprehend the next text they read.

Certain types of activity will be appropriate for all levels, even if the actual language items will differ. These might include work on referencing within the text. For example we ask learners to underline a number of pronouns like it/they or demonstratives like this/these in the text and then work out what they refer to. Ideally, the referent will not always be the most recent noun in the text! Another area
is conjunction: we might blank out a few conjunctions in a text and ask learners to suggest a suitable conjunction (or choose between options) for each space. The learners should also explain their choice, as this encourages them to explain the relationships between different parts of the text.

Other activities will depend on the reading level of the learners. Early readers will work more on building up fluency through work on word recognition, and recognising correspondences between spelling and sounds, eg that “ph” is pronounced /f/. Developing readers might focus on ellipsis (sentences with missing words) eg identifying the missing words in “They’re going to write a blog and post it on their website”\(^1\) or paraphrasing/lexical variation, as in

*Some education specialists recently put on a festival to encourage children to make mistakes! Yes, it’s true. The experts were worried that young people are not creative and innovative enough for the modern world.*

The learners look for examples where the writer has used synonyms to describe the same thing (*specialists/experts, children/young people*). The aim here is not primarily to extend the learners’ vocabulary (though this may happen incidentally) but to train them in looking for such variations in future texts.

Advanced readers, especially those in academic contexts, might concentrate on decoding complex sentences. For example, let us imagine that learners are working on a text which contains this sentence:

*Developed countries, like those in Europe and North America, waste around 650 million tonnes of food each year and so do developing countries.*

The activity might involve the learners answering these questions:

1. What is the verb? (answer: waste)
2. What or who is doing the wasting (or, with learners who have the necessary terminology, “what is the subject of the verb?”)? (answer: developed countries)
3. What do they waste? (answer: 650 million tonnes etc)
4. What does the word “so” refer back to? (answer: the verb “waste”)
5. How could you make this a sentence on its own? (answer: developing countries also waste food)

Learners should recognise that these questions form a process: locating the verb is a good way to start decoding a sentence, followed by subject and then (if there is one) the object. As the sentences the learners encounter become progressively more complex, this skill becomes more automatic.

Another example might be summary words (very common in academic writing). In the following text, learners might be asked to say what “this process” refers to.

*As early as the sixteenth century, English had already adopted words from around fifty other languages, and today the figure stands at over 120. But how did this process happen?*
Finally, they may be asked to look for words and phrases that demonstrate the writer’s stance towards the information they are describing. Modal verbs, sentence adverbs like significantly, and “think and report” verbs like claim can be noted and interpreted.

Even when a text (for example, in a coursebook) is being mainly used for other purposes such as grammar work or discussion, the teacher can always introduce the ideas above, just by asking learners “What does the word ‘they’ in line 22 refer to?” or “Why does the writer use the verb ‘confirm’ rather than ‘say’? How would the sense change if she used ‘claim’ instead?” and so on. These kinds of questions only take a minute or two, but focus the learners’ attention on important details in the text that top-down activities may skip over.

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To see bottom-up decoding in practice in the classroom, watch Navigate author Rachael Roberts’ video demonstration here.

1 All examples and texts are taken from Navigate.