

DEVELOPING READING SKILLS THROUGH VOCABULARY EXERCISES

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ABSTRACT:

THE FOCUS PLACED ON READING SKILLS IN SCHOOL IS NO ACCIDENT. IN SCHOOL, STUDENTS ARE TRAINED TO FACE LIFE, AND IN LIFE, THEY NEED TO HANDLE COMMUNICATION WELL IN THE FIRST PLACE. THIS THESIS STUDIES THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING SKILLS THROUGH VOCABULARY EXERCISES. IT IS MEANT TO HELP STUDENTS WHO HAVE OFTEN FACED DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING A TEXT DUE TO THEIR POOR MASTERING OF THE ROMANIAN LANGUAGE, BUT ALSO TO THE IMPROPER APPROACH OF THE TEXT MEANING. THE AIM IS TO ENHANCE, WITH TIME, SOME SKILLS OF GENERAL COMMUNICATION IN DAY TO DAY SITUATIONS. IT IS CRUCIAL TO HELP THE STUDENT RELEASE HIS OR HER POTENTIAL, TO FOCUS ON THE MASTERY OF WORDS, IN ORDER TO FIND SOLUTIONS TO HIS OR HER PROBLEMS. THE RESEARCH PART AIMS AT ESTABLISHING A SET OF INTERACTIVE LEARNING EXERCISES FOR A UNIQUE STUDY GROUP, IN VIEW OF DEVELOPING READING SKILLS, THE ABILITY TO READ AND UNDERSTAND INFORMATION, RAISING THE SCHOOL RESULTS LEVEL, AND FOSTERING POSITIVE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS.

KEY WORDS. COMMUNICATION; READING; SKILLS; VOCABULARY; INTERACTIVE LEARNING; TEXT AND CONTEXT; ACHIEVEMENT.

INTRODUCTION

According to the **Romanian Explanatory Dictionary**, reading is defined as the action of reading. This concept is somehow a general one, since, as seen by a Romanian language and literature teacher, reading is a complex activity, which implies not only deciphering the text by using Romanian language skills, but also explaining the text meaning, and gradually enhancing day to day general communication skills. Literature reading focuses on the text (the ability to read and comprehend the contents), as well as the context (the ability to interpret the literary text within an artistic trend, a certain genre, literary species or within the writing universe of the author), the sub-text (the significance of the characters, the narrator's perspective and the plot), and the post-text (by using the impressions after reading and the empathic explanations, the student is helped to create a system of values and moral principles, and also to develop a taste for what is beautiful, to improve and use an expressive language every day, etc).

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In this manner, during literature classes, the teacher guides the reading process according to the manuals and the curricula, assessing the results pursuant to the applicable norms. The fear of failing in school, as well as the strongly negative image of public schools, make students hesitate about reading, especially about extra reading tasks, since the literature on the school agenda is studied in class. Stimulating reading skills and the development of such reading skills are both part of the educational scope, as a whole, and are key components of the Romanian literature classes. This is why the teacher searches and establishes continually new teaching strategies to achieve the desired results.

MAIN TEXT

By observing the principle of literary text accessibility and suitability for the age and group characteristics, and also by using various teaching methods and means to facilitate the understanding of the literary text, one can devise a series of vocabulary exercises, meant to aid students comprehend the literary and non-literary text, since working with vocabulary must not end after unknown words have been thoroughly explained, it must go on until they are assimilated into the active vocabulary of the students. Such activities represent specific objectives: activating the vocabulary of students by both verbal and written communication; enriching vocabulary with new words, and using them to communicate both verbally and in writing; vocabulary variation, style suitability and practicing verbal and written communication. Vocabulary exercises allow us to use the definition and application of semantic categories: antonyms, synonyms, homonyms, paronyms and figurative meaning of words. The teaching methods focusing on enriching and diversifying the vocabulary may be applied during literature classes, as well as during verbal and written communication, and grammar (parts of speech) classes.

Basic examples :

a) Antonym exercises:

- Find antonyms for the following words: *young, smooth, kindness...* Use these pairs of words in sentences.

b) Synonym exercises:

- Write down synonym series for the following words: *snow, homeland, sunrise ...* Use them in sentences.
- Find synonyms for the following phrases: *become aware of, show one's true colors, to chew at somebody, to whip into shape...* Use them in sentences.

c) Homonym exercises:

- Explain the different meanings of words that sound identical: *know/no, peace/piece, here/hear, break/brake*. Make sentences using the different meanings.

d) Exercises for the figurative meaning of words:

Eg: Fair child- *fair autumn* (leaves turn yellow in autumn)
common trait- *special trait*.

- Add a trait of another object based upon an explanation.

Eg: Grey cover – Grey autumn (the autumn is grey because it's cloudy and bleak)
autumn.....

common trait – *special trait*

e) Exercises concerning the fluency of ideas, by identifying the phrases by size, form, weight, color, taste; identifying by means of traits.

eg: Guess who or what it is about, then make sentences with: it is **white**=....., it/he/she is **high/tall**=....., **small**=....., **stately**=....., **fluffy**=....., **straight**=....., etc.

f) Fluency exercises with associations, by transferring objective - concrete phrases into stylistic phrases.

Eg: "The stove got really heated."

The phrase "**got really heated**" is transformed by students by means of a heuristic dialogue:

- the fight got really heated;
- the dance got really heated;
- his flushed cheeks showed he got really heated with anger;
- the scorching sun got the ground really heated

g) Exercises with changing the grammar categories: substantive- verb, verb- substantive, substantive-adjective.

eg: break- to break, delight – to delight, winter - wintry

glue -....., to test -....., spring-.....

voice -....., to cut -....., summer-.....

play -....., to joke -....., fall-.....

h) Exercises to replace certain words with other words or expressions having the same meaning meant to help develop the fluency and expressiveness:

Eg: Replace each of the phrases below with other synonymous phrases, then with their synonyms:

To dash in =

To give a helping hand =

To give the news =

To add oil to the fire =

i) Exercises for the development of spontaneous fluency:

eg: The exercises try to highlight as many features of an object/ creature;

Our **house** – is well lit. **Ion** knows – that I am his friend.

- is big.

– how to learn.

- is clean.

– when I need help.

Exercises asking students to turn an image into verses they learned previously or into text fragments. Turning an image into ideas is an important practice in creating and developing the intellectual skills of students and, at the same time, a means to investigate the affective values of language, and the students' ability to make use of the language as a tool to express their cultural knowledge.

The language value increases pursuant to its precision within the reflexive and affective realm. Vocabulary exercises are meant to help students acquire skills such as clear, accurate and eloquent expression, to facilitate the artistic creation process. Understanding the meaning of communication is mandatory in order to be able to express oneself in a pleasing, correct, subtle manner. The Romanian language includes a large number of words with multiple association possibilities, and the student may choose not only the words, but also the association of such words.

Students' sensitiveness to the expressive value of the linguistic elements may be stimulated by making them sense the stylistic component, by creating other figures of speech. We are all aware of the special role of epithets, comparisons, metaphors, and here are some examples of different types of exercises:

- Underline the words denoting characteristic traits in the following sentences:
“I feel like dense, intoxicating vapors choking me”

“Her hair white, eyes small

And warmly tender,

As if she was right before me

The image of my frail granny

As I saw her in my baby years.”

“The grave and silent loneliness of the still forest wrapped around me. And amid this, on an emerald island, surrounded by a thicket of green trees, a splendid palace made of milky white marble stood tall.”

- Identify at least three traits for each of the following substantives: *flowers, forest, street*.

- Find substantives that may have the following traits: *green, thick, defoliated, sharp, cold, dry*.

- Select the words expressing traits:

For each adjective you identify, give several examples of substantives:

-beautiful, small, round, red, sour, many, courageous, tender.

- Fill in the blanks with corresponding adjectives:

The snowdrop lifts itsstalk. On top of it all, the flower shine.....and..... like snow. Its..... petals open and a.....sun ray caresses them.

Vocabulary may be enriched and practiced by using synonyms, which allow for subtlety of expression.

Here are several exercises we can do in class:

- Find words having the same meaning as: snow, strong, mad.

Practice such word meanings by using them in sentences.

- “Nicolae Bălcescu”:-the historian

- “Poor mom”:- unlucky, wretched, sad

One word may have several different meanings. Replace the words by using the most proper version:

Eg: Rustle:

- murmur, swish, shiver, whisper.

- noise, quiver, convulsion.

The moment the teacher entered the room, the rustle stopped.

A soft hum echoed among the tree leaves.

The spring whir sounded from afar.

The rustling of the weapons announced the battle had started.

Comparison is another good technique to use. Starting with some resemblances, we can highlight certain traits of an object, creature or phenomena, and students may have a better perception of what is described or told. The connection between the two comparison terms is usually made by means of the preposition *like*. Hence, the vocabulary and expression may be enriched with the help of comparison exercises:

- Compare the following actions as seen in the sample sentence:

Eg.: *The fire is like a piece of the scorching sun.*

The little rabbit trembled.....

The moon shines.....

- Compare the following characteristics, with as many words as you can:

White like.....(*milk, snow, chalk*)

Red like.....

Blue like.....

- Replace the phrases to the left with different ones, as shown in the example:
The light flooded the sky *like a night queen*. / *The night queen* flooded the sky.
The stars lit the sky *like beacons*. /

The moon rises upon the hill *like embers in a dying fire* /

These exercises help students adjust from comparisons to metaphors. The high efficiency of the synecitic method in training expression and vocabulary subtlety has already been proven. However, metaphors require a relatively high ability of the abstract thinking, whereas the unity of structures is caught due to their differences. “The abridged or implied comparison”, as defined by Tudor Vianu, the metaphor asks the user to seize an analogy between a given impression and a new one.

Exercises in this case are a more difficult, but efficient variation:

- a) Associate the following words with human actions:

eg.: The moon goes to bed

The horizon-.....

The shadow-.....

The forest-.....

- b) Write down five sentences exaggerating the size of things, creatures.

Eg: The tower reached the sky.

The hill.....etc.

Such exercises develop language, grow and diversify the vocabulary, training students to read, analyze and understand literature, and helping them develop proper and expressive speaking skills, and also reading skills.

During middle school, contact with literary works, as well as non literary works, means actually reading literary and non literary works; identifying the essential and minor meanings of a written message; recognizing the specific structure of the epic text, the expressive procedures of the lyrical works; using certain techniques to approach the written text; the analysis and interpretation of epic, lyrical and drama works; identifying the ethical and cultural features of a given text.

The functional-communicative pattern – integrated development of the oral reception skills, oral expression, perception of the written message and expression in writing, respectively – comes with a new approach of the text, as a whole. All learning acts require the individual engagement of the student, therefore, learning to work with books requires the teacher to ask students to study individually the reading elements, and see this effort as a methodical approach. Geoff Petty, author of *Teaching today. Modern teaching methods*, identifies three methodical approaches to teach reading skills:

- a. “Superficial processing, where students are passive, and their main concern is to:
 - cover all the contents;
 - understand how much they remember;
 - find the correct answer;
 - assimilate non raw information;
 - memorize word by word.
- b. In depth processing, when students actively engage their minds and focus on:

- the main idea;
- what lies behind the reasoning;
- the overview image;
- the conclusions it leads to;
- the points of reference;
- the logic of reasoning;
- the ideas that remain unclear;
- their own opinion about the text conclusions. [...]

c. Zero degree processing, when the student only reviews the text, considering that understanding the text will automatically entail an assimilation process. The student is concerned with:

- finish reading as soon as possible;
- going out for a coffee”2.

The in depth processing matches the explicative reading method, which consists of a complex series of methods, involving conversations, explanations, demonstrations, storytelling, role plays, etc., whereas reading a text is synonymous with understanding it. Students try to uncover the ideas by themselves, to convey personal conclusions, to accept the fact that the same text may be read and interpreted differently, may trigger different feelings and emotions, depending on each reader, hence the text is approached in an interpretative manner, so as to entail certain *intentio lectoris*: “...one must search a text for what the beneficiary is able to pin down, according to his/her own significance systems and/or his/her own wishes, impulses or arbitrary criteria”3.

The algorithm of explicative reading, a method frequently applied both in primary and middle school, is:

a) getting ready for the reading activity, which aims at stimulating the students for the reading activity; introducing the difficult terms (which might affect their receptivity) and explaining such terms by means of dialogue/discussion based on vocabulary practice techniques;

b) reading the entire text, which may be model reading (done by the teacher), or an independent activity, done by students, at home or in class; making sure the text was understood, by means of a discussion about the author, the title, the characters, the action/message (according to the class level and the type of text); prior to the model reading activity, the teacher may assign a teaching task, focusing on certain aspects of the read text, so that students may get some extra motivation to follow the model reading, and the teacher may use a prop to make sure the students understand the text;

c. reading fragments, analyzing the text and highlighting the main ideas, establishing a plan of ideas;

d. reading the entire plan of ideas, and engaging into a general discussion – in view of retracing the ideated synthesis of the text.

CONCLUSION

The explicative reading may be the most common methods to teach reading skills, which provides the Romanian language and literature teacher with an ideal framework to help students train and develop reading skills. However, if used excessively, it may become monotonous, and lead to the decline of the students’ receptivity to studying texts.

Students today expect new challenges, and therefore, teachers need to come up with interesting and captivating texts, to uncover new reading interpretation keys each time, to help them develop their analysis and synthesis skills, to appeal to their personal experience.

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