# Teaching Strategies for Reading Comprehension:

# How to help both multilingual and native speaker students cope with complex high-level texts

**by Leora Freedman, http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/advising/ell**

**ELL Coordinator, Faculty of Arts and Science**

It is possible to build "transferable skills" into the discussion of even one reading. Instructors can work with students not only on understanding the particular article, but also on ensuring that they go away from class or tutorial with strategies, vocabulary and concepts they can apply to future readings.Points 1 to 10 on the following pages will be of particular interest to those teaching in humanities and social science fields. Points 11 to 21 are particularly important for science and social science. **Note:** Activities **#1, #2, and #3** are ideally done at the end of the previous class or tutorial, *before* students read the article. It can be difficult to leave time at the end of a session to preview the coming readings, but it's very worthwhile.

1. **Preview the overarching concept**. A brief preparatory discussion of the larger ideas before reading can help multilingual students recall the relevant vocabulary they already know. It also gives everyone a mental framework in which to understand the text. Ask students what they already know about this topic; what words or terms they associate with it, and whether they already have opinions that may be challenged. Or ask them to skim the text for its main focus or an answer to a particular question. Pull out a controversial quote or surprising bit of information for an early discussion that will be informed by the later reading. Point out also that students can do their own previewing for other readings.

2. **Preview cultural concepts.** Students from outside Canada may need explanation of relevant cultural and historical information. Everyone may benefit from a brief review of a key set of facts from anything like the general workings of a Parliamentary election to the reasons people might go to a summer cottage in a place without Internet. Point out that students can get quick, accurate background information from the e-encyclopedias accessible from the U of T Libraries home page and often from the Library Resources tab of the course Blackboard site

3. **Preview vocabulary.** The article may contain words that are new or words that are familiar but used in ways that students haven't encountered. Choose vocabulary that is essential to this text, but also keep an eye out for words that may be important in other texts in this discipline. Explain how the same word may have completely different meanings in different disciplines. It is also helpful to alert students to the meaning of word roots, prefixes and suffixes. They can find further information about Greek and Latin roots in many handbooks on academic writing, e.g., Frank, *Modern English: A Reference Guide*.

4. **Divide the article into logical sections.** As part of the discussion, show students how the article is structured and mention how this structure follows (or does not completely follow) a pattern typical for this discipline. Follow up by asking them to divide an article on their own into its logical sections, or groups of paragraphs that accomplish a certain task. This is very worthwhile in discussing longer articles without headings. Ask students what headings they would write for particular groups of paragraphs.

5. **Look for dominant modes of rhetoric.** Point out where authors employ the standard modes of rhetoric or organization, like comparison, contrast, cause-effect, argument, classification, exemplification, process analysis, definition or extended definition. Refer students to writing guides that discuss these patterns (for instance Northey and Procter, *Writer's Choice),* or online resources such as those listed at the end of this file. Show how one or another rhetorical mode may dominate, or how the author may be using several modes alternately or simultaneously. Perceiving these structures also gives students frameworks within which to organize their own writing. Point out which transitional words indicate a particular mode: e.g., if the author says "namely," be alert for an example.

6. **Distinguish between opinions the author supports and those she's citing in order to argue against them.** Particularly for multilingual students, missing a word or a nuance can lead to a failure to make this crucial distinction. Encourage students to look for verbal clues as to where a particular reference fits in the overall argument. They should pay attention to word choices and *tone.*

7. **Encourage students to use their own experience and observations.** Particularly in small group discussions of an article, students generally enjoy relating course material to evidence they know of, whether from other reading or anecdotally from life. This type of discussion builds reading comprehension in that it stimulates interest in and awareness of an author's claims. It also builds critical thinking in that it lets people practice making a claim and supporting it with relevant details and examples.

8. **Identify the author's theoretical standpoint, political framework, biases, etc.**Students can increase their comprehension of articles by looking for clues as to the author's politics, theoretical preference, and biases. Encourage them to distinguish between prejudices (or unreasoned judgments) and biases (the author's intellectual tendencies and preferences). Full comprehension of a text involves looking for clues and making logical inferences as to the implications of individual word choices as well as the larger points of the argument.

   Students can further deepen their reading skills by attempting to identify any logical inconsistencies in an author's claims. Here, they may wish to consider whether the author's evidence or explanatory statements always support the claims she's making. Students can be encouraged to look for the classic fallacies (such as a "sweeping generalization" or "either-or" error in their readings as part of formulating their own critical response to an author's argument. Again, online advice files on fallacies can help students identify fallacies in their own arguments as well as in arguments they read and hear.

9. **Stress the importance of reaching the end.** Students who are reading slowly should be encouraged to reach the end of their readings in whatever way works for them. This may at times involve skipping over areas they don't understand (and, if possible, returning to them later), making judgments about which areas are most crucial for this course, and getting a general meaning of words from the context. For example, if students are expected to have a solid basis in a particular text, they can't get there by doing a word-by-word translation of pages 1 and 2 if the reading is 15 or 20 pages long. If the goal is to understand a theory or general historical trend, they may be focusing so much on translating subtle details that they fail to grasp the larger concept that's actually key for the course. A discussion can help them identify where to place their focus. Point out to them what you are concentrating on and why.

10. **Make a visual representation of the article on the board or on a transparency**. Use boxes, lines, circles, etc. to create a visual representation that shows the structure of the article and the hierarchy of information in it (i.e. overarching concepts; main arguments and explanations; specific examples, and specific details). This may orient students sufficiently that they can then more profitably read a difficult article on their own.

***Here are some further reading comprehension strategies for discussion of a science or social science text. (Some of these are also relevant for humanities fields.)***

11. **Review the purpose and expected content of the standard sections of a primary research article in your discipline (e.g., Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion).** For example, students' comprehension will be increased if they know that the purpose of an Introduction is to situate the authors' study in the overall context of ongoing research in the field, as well as to justify its significance or social usefulness. Their comprehension of the Discussion will be enhanced by expecting authors to identify factors that may have influenced the results, such as failures of equipment or the use of self-reported data from subjects.

12. **Explain the function of the literature review.** Many students don't realize that this isn't just a summary of current and past research, but is guided by a certain agenda. Show them how a review of the literature often leads up gradually to an identification of a gap in the research and thus a justification for the authors' own work.

13. **Emphasize that critical thinking is expressed in science/ social science texts.** Students may not grasp that the article intends to construct an overall argument or to present the authors' views on matters open for debate. Students may believe that scientific texts are completely objective and may be unaware that they should be reading critically. You can facilitate their development as readers by pointing out sections, for example in a Discussion, in which the authors are critically examining their own evidence and building a case for its interpretation.

14. **Point out areas where authors identify possible conflicting interpretations of results** (e.g., where authors identify confounding factors in an experiment). Emphasize how the awareness of constant new developments in scientific research is reflected in the language of the paper (e.g., in areas where the authors frankly admit what isn't known).

15. **Have students practice critiquing aspects of the study design described in an article**(e.g., the selection of a population). Ask them to think of other interpretations of the evidence which may be ignored in the article. By modeling this type of thoughtful, active reading, you're helping them become more effective readers.

16. **Point out the function of verb tenses in scientific writing.** Clarify that the use of present tense verbs signals a general principle established by research: "cells of the innate immune system **are** highly influenced by depression."** Point out that the use of past tense signals a reporting of the results of a particular study: "males who suffered from depression and experienced early life stress **were** more likely to have an overactive immune system."[Quoted from Xiang, R. (2007). Depression's influence on the immune system. *Journal of Undergraduate Life Sciences, 1:1*,juls.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/juls/issue/view/136.This journal has been published yearly at U of T since 2007. Its high-quality examples of peer-reviewed student writing offer good reading practice.]

17. **Show how even very difficult passages can become clearer if the reader is alert to the use of transitional words** (e.g., "however" signals that a contrasting statement or fact will follow; "therefore" claims direct causation).

18. **Explain the differences between quantitative and qualitative research.** If your field employs both types of studies, discuss with students why authors may have chosen one or the other for a particular purpose. Have them practice identifying the relative advantages or disadvantages of each type for exploring a particular question.

19. **Clarify the level of detail at which you expect students to understand the readings.** Students in undergraduate science classes are often assigned readings they lack the background to comprehend fully, with the expectation that there is still much they can glean from the reading. Being specific about your expectations and about which areas they do not need to understand fully (e.g., statistical analysis) can alleviate much anxiety and keep them on task.

20. **Recommend a dictionary.** If you know of a useful referenceresource for high-level reading in your field, be sure to pass on this information to your students. For multilingual students, the Webster's Collegiate is likely to be a much better resource for science than the dictionaries they may be using, which often contain English and the student's home language. If the student has trouble not so much with technical vocabulary but more with overall comprehension, a learner's dictionary may be needed. You can recommend the Longman *Dictionary of Contemporary English*; Oxford and Collins also publish similar dictionaries, and all are good.

21. **Recommend additional reading.** It is difficult to build up vocabulary, speed, and comprehension by reading academic material alone. If students are having difficulty with language, encourage them to read some easier material for a short time each day. They may enjoy reading the science section of a newspaper, a book by a popular science author like Stephen Jay Gould, or a biography of a famous scientist. See the Reading E-Writing page on the ELL website (listed below) for links to suggested outside reading.

### *Research on the role of reading in academic success:*

Crandall, J. & Kaufman, D., eds. (2003). Content-based instruction in higher education settings. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Khoo, E. (2007). Beating the odds: Success stories of students overcoming English language challenges. (Booklet). University of Toronto Scarborough, The Writing Centre, Teaching and Learning Services. ctl.utsc.utoronto.ca/eld/sites/default/files/beating_the_odds.pdf

Zamel, V. (2004). Strangers in academia: The experiences of faculty and ESOL students across the curriculum. In V. Zamel & R. Spack (Eds.), Crossing the curriculum: Multilingual learners in college classrooms (pp.3-37). Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum.

### *Student resources for reading development:*

Freedman, Leora, *Reading E-Writing*, at http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/advising/ell/reading-ewriting This section of the ELL website includes a list of links for suggested outside reading.

Freedman, Leora, *Resources for students*, at http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/advising/ell/resources-for-students offers short practical advice files on strategies for reading critically and efficiently (e.g., identifying an author's opinion, distinguishing between information and interpretation, seeing how information is used in an argument).

Taylor, Dena B., *Comprehensive guide to writing in the health sciences*, at hswriting.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/hswriting/issue/current. Includes a useful handout on the functions of verbs in scientific writing, and a guide to transitions; the file on literature reviews is famous world-wide.

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