

# Developing Reading Skills and Comprehension in English for Specific Purposes

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**Abstract:** Reading in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a complex and interactive activity that requires significant time and resources to cultivate. The process of reading comprehension involves deriving meaning from a text and actively engaging with its content. This article presents a theoretical framework that addresses the classification of reading skills, criteria for ranking and transferring skills, and explores the impact of the balance between skills and language on the teaching of reading in ESP. It emphasizes the importance of adopting diverse reading styles, strategies, and techniques in the second/foreign language classroom to facilitate successful interaction with authentic ESP texts and enhance second language readers' efficiency. The article also examines various techniques for testing reading comprehension. Additionally, it investigates the factors influencing success in reading comprehension tasks, including the type and duration of students' training, the length of their English study at the faculty, the duration of training in reading skills, the frequency of testing, and the nature of texts used for reading comprehension assessments.

**Keywords:** English, Reading, ESP

**Introduction:** Reading is an essential and multifaceted skill in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) that requires dedicated time and resources to develop. It entails reading rapidly, maintaining a flow of information to make crucial connections and inferences for comprehension. Readers approach texts with a specific purpose, whether it be for entertainment, information, or research, which provides motivation and contributes to becoming a proficient reader. The interactive nature of reading involves utilizing both background knowledge and information from the text, as various skills work together simultaneously during the reading process. Readers naturally anticipate understanding the content they are reading. Reading is a flexible activity, employing a range of strategies to read efficiently. It should be noted that reading skills develop gradually over time and are not acquired suddenly or immediately following a reading development course.

**Reading Comprehension.** Reading goes beyond the mechanical process of identifying letters, words, and sentences leading to comprehension. Scholar K. S. Goodman in "Reading: A psycholinguistic guessing game" emphasizes that readers utilize their existing background knowledge, known as schemata, to make predictions about the text and to establish connections between unfamiliar information and their existing knowledge (D.E. Rumelhart, "Schemata: The building blocks of language").

It is evident that while decoding plays a vital role in comprehension, readers employ more complex processes to generate meaning, as mentioned by D. Eskey in "Conclusion" in *Research in Reading English as a Second Language*. However, the primary objective of reading is to acquire information. In English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the reader's purpose becomes a central consideration, as it is intrinsically linked to the learning task. The ultimate goal is to comprehend the message being conveyed. Within instructional settings, comprehension is often measured through various outputs, such as answering comprehension questions, providing written summaries, or delivering oral reports (T. Hudson, "A content comprehension approach to reading English for Science and Technology").

**Reading Skills.** A reading skill refers to the cognitive capacity that individuals possess and utilize when engaging with written text. Within the taxonomies presented in the subsequent paragraph, certain skills appear to have a broader scope compared to others. Based on (F.B.Davies, "Research in comprehension in reading,") reading skills encompass various abilities such as: Identifying the meaning of words, drawing inferences, recognizing the writer's techniques, identifying the mood of a passage, finding answers to questions. Additionally, according to (J. Munby, *Communicative Syllabus Design*) reading skills may also involve: recognizing the script of a language; deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar vocabulary; understanding explicitly and implicitly stated information, grasping conceptual meaning and the communicative value of sentences, recognizing relationships within sentences and between different parts of the text using lexical cohesion devices; identifying indicators and the main point of information in discourse; distinguishing the main idea from supporting details; Selectively extracting relevant points from the text; Utilizing basic reference skills; Employing reading techniques such as skimming, scanning, and transcribing information from diagrams or charts. As stated in E.Lunzer, M. Waite, and T. Dolan, "Comprehension and comprehension tests," reading skills include: Understanding word meaning in context, achieving literal comprehension, drawing inferences, interpreting metaphors, identifying main ideas, forming judgments. Furthermore, according to (W.Grabe, "Current developments in second language reading research,") reading skills encompass: automatic recognition skills, vocabulary and structural knowledge, knowledge of formal discourse structure, content and world background knowledge, synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies, metacognitive knowledge and skills for monitoring comprehension.

Grabe's taxonomy (W.Grabe, "Current developments in second language reading research,") utilizes broad categories that correspond to knowledge areas, which may not sufficiently break down the specific component skills within reading. According to (E. Williams and C. Moran, "Reading in a foreign language at intermediate and advanced levels with particular reference to English,") there is a distinction between "language-related" and "reason-related" skills, suggesting that reading can be further divided into different levels of component skill categories.

Some efforts have been made to organize reading skills into hierarchies. Lunzer et al.'s taxonomy (E. Lunzer, M. Waite, and T. Dolan, "Comprehension and comprehension tests,") follows this arrangement, with lower-level skills placed at the top. While Munby's taxonomy (J. Munby, *Communicative Syllabus Design*) was not originally intended to be hierarchically organized, it appears that certain skills presuppose the acquisition of other skills. Skills in reading are interdependent, acquired at varying rates, and serve different purposes. For instance, decoding words is necessary but not sufficient for comprehending written texts.

This component skill approach proves practical as it offers valuable insights into the reading process and classroom practices. It can be beneficial for the teaching of reading, as it allows for a more targeted and comprehensive approach to skill development.

According to (A. H. Urquhart and C. J. Weir, *Reading in a Second Language: Process, Product, and Practice*) possible criteria for ranking skills within a reading skill system are as follows:

1. Logical implication: This criterion suggests that a higher-level skill within the system can be seen as presupposing or relying on all the components below it. In other words, mastery of a particular skill implies competence in the lower-level skills.

2. Pragmatic implication: This criterion indicates that if a reader demonstrates proficiency in one skill within the system, it can be inferred that they possess all the "lower" skills. This implies that the higher-level skill encompasses and incorporates the lower-level skills.

3. Difficulty: Skills are arranged in order of increasing difficulty. This criterion implies that certain skills require more advanced cognitive abilities or a higher level of proficiency to master compared to others. The hierarchy reflects the increasing complexity and challenges associated with acquiring these skills.

4. Developmental: This criterion acknowledges that some skills are acquired earlier in the reading development process compared to others. It suggests that readers do not necessarily progress through a linear sequence, such as comprehending "explicitly stated" information before

reaching the stage of inferencing. Different readers may acquire skills at different rates and in varying sequences.

**Reading Skills in English for Specific Purposes.** In English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the teaching of reading is influenced by the specific purpose of reading and the balance between skills and language. Within this context, two notable contributions to the approach to reading in ESP are considered significant, as mentioned in (T. Dudley-Evans and M. J. St John, *Developments in ESP: a Multidisciplinary Approach*).

One of the significant contributions in the approach to reading in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is the shift from viewing the text solely as a linguistic object to recognizing it as a vehicle of information (T. F. Johns and F. Davies, "Text as a vehicle for information: the classroom uses of written texts in teaching reading in a foreign language"). In this approach, the key principles for ESP learners prioritize the accurate and efficient extraction of information over focusing on language details. Understanding the macrostructure of the text takes precedence over language study, and the application of the information obtained from the text is considered highly important. In this process, the reader initially processes the language itself and subsequently connects the ideas presented in the text with their existing prior knowledge and background information. This approach highlights the importance of information retrieval and comprehension in ESP reading, emphasizing the practical application of the information acquired.

The second significant contribution to the teaching of reading in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses is the recognition that effective reading requires both language proficiency and specific skills. As mentioned in (C. Hosenfeld, "A preliminary investigation of the reading strategies of successful and non-successful second language learners") less successful foreign language learners tend to approach texts in a fragmented manner, while successful learners prioritize overall meaning, often employing strategies such as guessing or skipping language and information that may hinder comprehension. (J. C. Alderson, "Reading in a foreign language: a reading problem or a language problem?") supports this notion by stating that several hypotheses have been tested regarding the role of language proficiency and skills in reading. It has been found that poor reading skills in a foreign language can be attributed, in part, to poor reading skills in the learners' native language (L1) and inadequate knowledge of the foreign language (L2). In order for learners to transfer their L1 reading skills to their L2 reading tasks, they need to reach a certain threshold level of proficiency in the second language (L2). This highlights the importance of both language competence and specific reading skills in successful reading comprehension. Learners need to develop their language proficiency in the target language (L2) to a sufficient level before they can effectively apply their L1 reading skills to comprehend texts in the L2.

Therefore, in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course, the reading component necessitates a careful balance between the development of specific reading skills and language proficiency. Several critical skills, as mentioned in (T. Dudley-Evans and M. J. St John, *Developments in ESP: a Multidisciplinary Approach*) are essential to be learned or transferred into the new language:

1. Selecting relevant information: The ability to identify and extract information that is pertinent to the current purpose or task.
2. Utilizing text features: Effectively utilizing text features such as headings, layout, and formatting to aid in comprehension and information retrieval.
3. Skimming: Quickly reading through the text to get a general sense of the content and meaning.
4. Scanning: Rapidly searching the text for specific details or information.
5. Identifying organizational patterns: Recognizing the structure and organization of the text, including paragraph breaks, transitions, and signal words.
6. Understanding sentence and discourse relations: Grasping the relationships within a sentence and between sentences to comprehend the flow and coherence of the text.
7. Using cohesive and discourse markers: Recognizing and utilizing words or phrases that connect ideas and provide coherence within the text.

8. Predicting, inferring, and guessing: Making educated guesses and drawing inferences based on contextual clues and prior knowledge.

9. Identifying main ideas, supporting ideas, and examples: Discerning the central concepts, supporting information, and illustrative examples within the text.

10. Processing and evaluating information during reading: Actively engaging with the information presented, critically evaluating its validity, relevance, and reliability.

11. Transferring or applying information: Using the acquired information during or after reading for various purposes, such as problem-solving, decision-making, or further research.

These skills form a crucial foundation for effective reading in an ESP context, facilitating comprehension, information extraction, and the practical application of acquired knowledge.

Many of these skills consist of multiple processes, and two useful initial stages are skimming and scanning. Skimming and scanning help ESP readers determine whether a text is worth reading and identify which parts require closer attention. After identifying a relevant text, ESP readers need to engage in careful reading, extracting meaning, and considering the author's attitude or perspective.

**Conclusion.** The article focuses on the development of reading skills and comprehension in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It introduces a theoretical framework that addresses the classification of reading skills and the impact of the balance between skills and language on ESP reading instruction. The article emphasizes the importance of adopting diverse reading styles, strategies, and techniques in the second/foreign language classroom for successful interaction with authentic ESP texts. It also examines various techniques for testing reading comprehension and explores the factors influencing success in reading tasks. The article highlights the shift from viewing the text as a linguistic object to recognizing it as a vehicle of information, as well as the recognition that effective reading requires both language proficiency and specific skills. It emphasizes the need for a careful balance between skills and language development in ESP reading instruction. The article concludes by discussing the essential skills for ESP readers, such as selecting relevant information, utilizing text features, skimming, scanning, identifying organizational patterns, and applying information during and after reading. Skimming and scanning are identified as useful initial stages for determining text relevance, while careful reading involves extracting meaning and considering the author's attitude or perspective.

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