Accelerated Learning In and Out of the Reading Classroom

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Abstract

The "accelerated learning approach" focuses on the promotion of learning success through fully engaging learners in the learning process and encouraging them to become more self-directed learners. Helping learners see their learning objectives, encouraging multi-sensory learning, involving learners in active exploration of what they learn and encouraging learners to show what they have learned and reflect on their learning processes are some of the tenets of this approach. This paper describes four types of reading activities designed on the basis of the principles of the "accelerated learning approach."

Introduction

Recently, there has been growing interest among educators (Best, 2011; Campell, 2003; Colin & Malcolm, 1997; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010) in the promotion of "accelerated learning," an approach that encompasses diverse techniques for faster and more effective learning. Essential to this approach are the following main considerations (Colin & Malcolm, 1997):

1) Motivation is the key to successful learning and interest is the key to motivation. Therefore, using interesting activities that engage learners leads to more successful learning.

2) "You can't hit a target if you do not see it" (p.76); therefore, helping learners to see the big picture and set specific learning goals is essential to effective learning.

3) Learning is more effective if learners make use of their multi-senses (visual, audio, kinesthetic) in the learning process. Visual learning can be powerful as 75% of our sensory receptacles are located in the eyes.

4) Exhibiting (being given opportunities to show, present, put on display, write up or share with peers) what a learner knows is an important way to effective learning.

5) Learning effective strategies helps learners learn how to learn, and when they continue to adopt strategies that work for them, they will have better control over their learning and are more likely to become self-directed learners.

6) Learners have different learning styles. They should be encouraged to reflect on their learning as reflection enables them to become more conscious of their own approaches to their learning, understand what works best for them and make necessary adjustments for better learning.

These considerations of the "accelerated learning approach" have also been put to good use by language teachers through the adoption of various activities in language classrooms. This paper introduces four types of reading activities that incorporate the above considerations in the language classroom.

Activities in the Reading Classroom

Type A: Activities Connecting Reading Objectives with Reading Speed

When reading, many L2 Learners tend to read word for word; doing this seems to give them a false sense of security that they have not "missed" anything, which can result in them missing the main idea of a reading text. Reading at word level is slow, and it affects comprehension of meaning as the learners fail to see the general idea when they over-focus on individual words. At the same time, L2 learners are much concerned about their speed of reading. Questions these learners often ask include "How can I read faster?" and "How many words should I cover each minute to be considered a fast reader?" The main problem lies in the fact that they are not consciously aware of the relationship between different reading objectives and reading speed and that word for word reading does not result in better comprehension. The following two activities are designed to encourage learners to set a clear reading objective and help them understand that there is no need to read word for word to achieve adequate comprehension of the ideas in a text.

Activity A1: Varying your reading speed with your reading purposes

This activity can be used to help learners understand that they should read materials selectively and at varying speed, depending on their purpose. The instructor can prepare a long reading text and set a list of different reading purposes/tasks and ask the learners to read to fulfill a particular purpose. Table 1 below shows a list of reading purposes/tasks and a brief explanation of what is expected of the readers for each purpose/task.

Reading purposes/Tasks	Explanation
1.Read the text to find out the definition of a particular concept	Students usually need a minute or less to find the definition.
2. Read the text to see if you can make use of any of the ideas in the text for a research paper/an essay on …	Students may take a bit more time with this task, but they only need to scan the text to see whether it contains relevant ideas for their research/writing task.
3. Suppose you are reading for leisure/ entertainment. Would you read/how would you read this kind of text?	Students need to make a connection here with their own interest and judge if they are interested in reading the text. There may be considerable individual differences from someone not wanting to read it at all to one wanting to read it in great detail based on their personal interests.
4. Suppose you are asked to write a summary of the text. How would you read it?	Students usually need to spend a reasonable amount of time to make sure they understand the text well before starting the summary writing task.

Table 1: Reading Objectives and Reading Speed

Students can be told to stop reading as soon as they think the purpose/task is fulfilled, and if possible, note down the time they have taken for each reading purpose/task. A short reflective session at the end of the activity should be held to make explicit the idea that not everything needs to be read slowly and carefully, nor should everything be read quickly. Readers should have a purpose before they read and different purposes determine the way a text should be read, with varying speed.

Resource: Visit http://www.tefl.net/esl-lesson-plans/authentic.htm for   authentic   reading materials that can be used for this activity.

Activity A2: Reading a text with "holes"

This activity will enable students to see that it is not necessary to read word for word to understand a reading text.

Take the print-out of a reading text and in front of the class remove some words from different places, leaving "holes" in the text. Let students read this text with gaps and ask them to sum up the main idea after reading. Students will find that they are able to get the gist of this incomplete text. They are usually convinced after such an activity that they do not need to read every word to capture the main idea of a text. Seeing an instructor tearing out certain parts of a reading page can also have a dramatic impact that helps to make this idea more memorable, just as one of our students commented "at first I was shocked to see my teacher tearing at a reading text, but this really left me a very deep impression and helped me remember that I do not need to read a text word for word to understand it."

Type B: Activities that Involve Multi-sensory Learning and Dramatization

According to Colin & Malcolm (1997, p.142), "we remember 20% of what we read, 30% of what we hear, 40% of what we see, 50% of what we say, 60% of what we do and 90% of what we see, hear, say and do". Reading alone has limitations. Paraphrasing and saying things aloud, using mind-mapping to visualize ideas and rewriting information into one's own words all help to turn something "that is alien and foreign to something that is familiar and comfortable and accessible" (Walnut, 2010, p.1).

The following three activities encourage the use of multi-senses in the reading process.

Activity B1: Hide and seek

This activity involves learners in "seeing, saying and hearing" what they read. It draws out learners' prior knowledge and encourages them to speak aloud their own predictions about a text. Instead of giving a whole reading text to the learners, teachers can "hide" the information by putting only part of a text (esp. a shorter one) on overhead transparency film (OHT) (or onto *PowerPoint* slides) and letting students speculate and seek out the rest of the

information. For example, first show the title of the text "Worry" and ask students what they predict the text will be about. Then show the first line of the text "Worry is like blood pressure" and ask students in what ways worry is like blood pressure. Presenting a text in this way is interesting and can lead to high level student engagement provided the text is not too long. This activity works extremely well with a narrative text. By making students "see, say and hear" what they read/predict to be in the text, they are more likely to effectively understand and remember the information.

Activity B2: Imagine you were…

This activity encourages learners to "say, hear, do and write" things about a text by playing a particular role, paraphrasing aloud a text and writing down the information. With a narrative text, a learner can imagine him/herself to be one of the characters and narrate his/her experiences and feelings by mainly paraphrasing and following the information given in the text and later writing it down. Take the example of the text "Merry Christmas, my friend," a story about an old man trying to find a new home for his pet dog before he goes away to an old age home, the learners read the story first; they can then retell the story by playing the role of the old man, the dog or the boy who is the new owner of the dog. They can also write the story down with some elaboration of their own thoughts and feelings. The "Imagine you were…" activity enables students to see an event from different perspectives and the completion of this activity requires a combination of reading, speaking and writing skills. It works well even with a science text in which a student can imagine himself/herself to be a laser beam or a particular virus and explain how it functions. A heavy academic text can be a lot more fun if you give life to the various elements described in the text by letting students "play" with them.

Resource: The story of "Merry Christmas, my friend" can be found at http://www.angelfire.com/ego/hazi/hamnaviimisc/miscm/xmasmyfriend.html

Activity B3: Drawing a learning map

Taking notes of a reading text can be a laborious process, and having a long page of notes purely with words may discourage the learner from reviewing it later. It is therefore useful to encourage students to draw a learning map of the main ideas in a text and recall/retell the information later by referring to the learning map only. Learners get a good overview and

better understanding of a text by drawing a learning map that captures the key ideas on a single page. An example of a learning map, *How to make a learning map*, taken from Colin & Malcolm (1997, p.99) is included here.
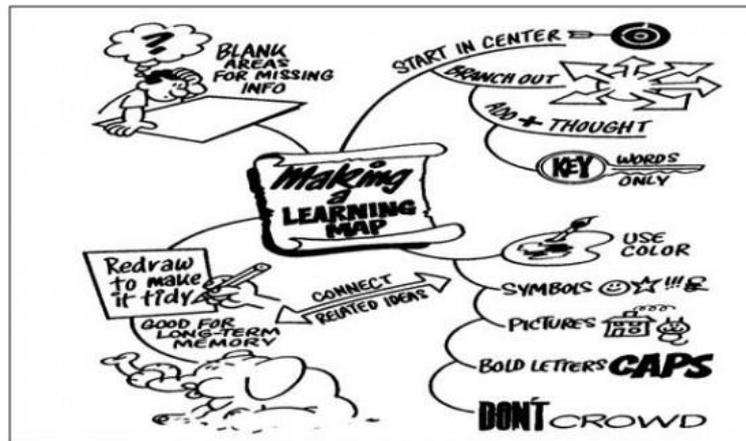
As visual learning is powerful, this often leads to better recall and comprehension of texts and the relationship between ideas in texts is clearer to the reader when it is presented in a visual format (Colin & Malcolm, 1997). Encouraging learners to retell the information by referring to the mind map also pushes them to try hard to recall useful information and become aware of gaps in their knowledge that they can find ways to fill in later (Walnut, 2010). Furthermore, students can extend this learning strategy to tackle the readings in their own discipline beyond using it for obtaining input for language learning only.

Type C: Activities Involving Collaboration and Competition

Walnut (2010, p.1) highlights the importance of peer learning and collaboration as he points out that "having to be accountable for someone else's learning will make you pay more attention and really learn the material." On the other hand, having the learners share with their peers is a way of exhibiting what they know/have learned, which is essential for effective learning (Colin & Malcolm, 1997). The following two activities encourage sharing and competition, which enhance learning effectiveness and help transfer some learning responsibility to the learners themselves.

Activity C1: Sharing what you have read

This activity maximizes language input and encourages learners to exhibit what they have learned by having them paired up to read and share with each other what they have read.

Each student reads a different text on his/her own, notes down some key phrases from the text and uses these phrases to help him/her retell the information in the text to the other. A variation of this activity is to ask each student to read a different text; each notes down some key phrases in the text and exchanges them with the other. The student who has not read the text tries to reconstruct the text by using the key phrases received and the other student helps to "fill in the gaps." This ensures more cognitive depth in the processing of the materials, and it also helps learners remember the phrases and expressions used in the original text.

Activity C2: Stumping the other group

"Stumping the other group" is a more challenging activity that involves competition. Students can be divided into two groups and each group is instructed to devise and ask questions about a reading text that may "stump" the other group. In other words, each group needs to ask challenging questions based on the reading text which the other group may find difficult to answer. The group that can answer more questions from the other group will win the competition. In order to ask and answer challenging questions, learners need to make use of some critical thinking/reading skills, such as asking inferential questions, reading between the lines, recognizing logical relationships and analyzing and evaluating the reading materials. The learners' questions and answers can also help the teacher to see possible areas that constitute comprehension difficulties, for example, when learners fail to ask relevant questions or when their answers reveal misunderstanding of certain ideas in the text.

Type D: Reflective Activities

It is important to encourage learners to reflect on their learning content as well as the learning process as this enables them to become more conscious of their own learning approaches, see gaps in their knowledge and learning and learn how to learn (Brockbank & McGill, 1998, p.73). According to Rowntree (1990, p.162), "if you plunge into a learning task without first considering your purpose, you may be wasting your time. And if you don't reflect on it afterward, you almost certainly will." It therefore seems more important to ask learners to reflect on their learning activities, and based on such reflection, to make adjustments for more effective learning in the future. The following two activities encourage learners to reflect on their learning content and their learning processes.

Activity D1: Making use of the known and unknown columns

Ask students to list/free write in the left column of the table below what they know about a topic before they read a text to activate their prior knowledge. As a post-reading task, they can be asked to write down in the right column what are the new things they have learned from the text and compare the new information with their prior knowledge written in the left column. There can also be an additional column in which students are encouraged to write down what else they are interested to know relating to the topic and how they are going to get the relevant information.

The text on "Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism" from http://wpacouncil.org/node/9 has been used here as an example.

What you already know about this topic (e.g. plagiarism)	What you learned from the text about this topic (e.g. plagiarism)
a) Copying other people's work b) Submit another person's work as one's own c) Sources not mentioned d) A serious academic offence	A clear definition of plagiarism; Although improper citation may not be considered plagiarism, students need to learn proper citation; Common causes of plagiarism; The shared responsibilities of students, Faculty and administrators to avoid plagiarism; Strategies to avoid plagiarism
What else will you be interested to know about this topic? How are you going to find that information?	
The reading mainly talks about how an instructor can help his/her students avoid plagiarism. I am interested to read something on tips for students to avoid plagiarism. I plan to search the Internet to find out two more texts on strategies and tips for students to avoid plagiarism. I am interested to learn more about my own university's policy on plagiarism. I will check the university's website to read about its plagiarism policy.	

Table 2: The Known and the Unknown

This activity involves students in reflecting on the learning content by activating and sharing their prior knowledge. Comparing what they know and the new information/ideas they acquire from the reading improves/reinforces learned knowledge as learners are exposed to the "gap" in their knowledge and are often keener to learn the new information/ideas. It also

helps students reorganize the information obtained, making reading a more active process and information in the reading materials more memorable. The additional step asks students to find additional resources relevant to the topic and take up opportunities to read them outside the classroom. This encourages learners to become more autonomous in their learning.

Activity D2: All on the plate for you to choose

It is often hard to find an activity that suits every student's learning style. Therefore, educators can provide a reading session for students to choose their preferred style in reading a text. For example, find a set of reading materials (make a few more copies than the number of students you have in your class) on a particular theme and put all readings on one side of the classroom. On the other side, put a set of reading activities (e.g. some of the reading activities introduced in this paper can serve this purpose), and mark them as either "individual" or "collaborative" based on how the reading activity is to be conducted. Ask students to choose one reading text from one side and an activity they prefer to do with the text from another side and start working (collaborative work is preferred). Students are more motivated to read when they are given the power to choose their preferred style in tackling a reading text.

Conclusion

These activities are easy to use, adapt and implement in most EFL contexts. As with most teaching practices, when educators begin using them they also review, remake and create more activities based on them. The strategies in these activities can help learners learn how to learn and become more self-directed learners, which is one of the main goals of the recommendations of the accelerated learning approach.

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