

**MARTA ELENA GUERRA-TREVIÑO****ADULT READING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:  
A NECESSARY COMPETENCE FOR KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY****Abstract**

This paper presents several “tips” for Spanish speaking adults who start a reading comprehension course in English. The document is the product of my twenty-five years of experience as a language teacher. By using these practical pieces of advice, learners understand the differences between English and their own language, are able read, and to produce their personal reading strategies in order to succeed when reading English texts, and simultaneously, they feel their learning stress is diminished.

By making the necessary adjustments, these reading hints may be applied to different languages especially Romance language teachers, who may create their own version to help students in their reading task.

**Introduction**

Because most nations have opened their doors worldwide to tourism and commerce, the need to communicate with people from different countries has increased to such an extent that foreign languages, especially English (Valenti, Avaro & Casalet, 2008), are now being taught in many elementary schools in Mexico, both public and private. At present, our educational authorities have considered necessary the teaching of English as a second language (L2), from elementary school up to university levels (Manzano, 2007).

People that handle English have better job opportunities because they read, write and use that language fluently (Phillips, 2003). International enterprises are nowadays hiring English speaking persons with better salaries, either to work here in Mexico or to be sent abroad to their company’s offices, being conscious that their employees will be able to communicate successfully.

**Presentation of the problem**

In order to graduate at any university in our country, Mexico, two requirements must be fulfilled before a thesis paper is accepted and the Graduation Examination takes place. It is compulsory for a student to do social service work in a governmental or public academic institution, during a period ranging from six months to two years. They also have to present a foreign language reading comprehension examination.

Those persons who have not had equal learning opportunities or were not exposed to English as children, have more difficulties in satisfying this second requirement. They struggle to learn the English language and reading comprehension becomes their learning starting point (Mihara, 2011).

If one is asked to define the word *reading*, different answers may come to mind. But one that satisfies me is: “*Reading is a dynamic and associative mental process*” (Ramírez, 2009). It is a complex task that demands much attention because a person

is in contact with two kinds of written words: *sight words*, and *meaningful words*. *Sight words* can be easily recognized because of their shape, while *meaningful words* “transmit” ideas. A decision has to be made by the reader regarding the method to be used in order to be successful. When reading a text, one may approach all words without considering their separate elements, or approach them by paying attention to every component part of a word (Alliende & Condemarin, 1993).

Once the chosen methodology has been successfully practiced, the reader will be mentally able to link words and sentences to grasp the message transmitted by the text and integrate it to his previous knowledge; this will modify or reinforce his social or cultural ideas.

Reading English at an adult stage is hard (Sousa, 2002) for Spanish-speaking people who have had only basic notions of that L2 language. On the one hand, adults are self-conscious of the fact that they do not have enough vocabulary because they find themselves forced to use the dictionary for almost every word they encounter; on the other, their vocabulary does not correspond to the one they usually handle in their mother tongue. Because they are able to read fluently in their own language, they want to approach the L2 text in a similar manner. So, when failing to understand the written message, they blame their reading clumsiness mainly on their scarce amount of vocabulary, unconsciously ignoring that they are lacking reading strategies that may easily be learned (Manzano, 2007; Day & Bamford, 1997).

In my experience as an English teacher, once Spanish-speaking adults grasp the way in which they should “visually jump back and forth” in order to establish the L2 word order and transfer it to the reader’s mother language, reading becomes easy and fun and the learning stress disappears.

At the beginning of a course I usually ask students: Why do you want to fit a foreign language text into your mother tongue’s structure or function? Remember that languages, like people, have their own characteristics, and those may be considered their personality. Eventually, they are convinced to try and use some strategies of their own in order to read fluently.

### **Proposed strategies for the appropriation of the written language**

In spite of the various phonetic changes it has suffered, English has kept the original etymological graphic use of words, whereas Spanish (and also Italian), have altered their original etymological writing (Alliende & Condemarin, 1993, p. 84), to create a phonetic and graphic correspondence.

As there is a scarce correspondence between the distinctive writing units and phonemes in English, it may be advisable to approach all words without paying too much attention to their particular elements, to facilitate the reading task.

To solve reading problems, students use some of the “tips” given below to assist themselves in their learning chores. Although there are several other elements that may be used when reading, I have found that those given below are easier to remember. Here are fifteen simple pieces of advice.

**First**, and most important, is this one directed to teachers. It refers to class environmental learning. Students must feel at ease with both, the teacher and their classmates, especially those persons who have tried to learn English and have been unsuccessful. The reason for their failure may be that they have classmates who have a higher knowledge of that language and their protagonist role in class does not

allow others to participate. For that reason, a person less competent in English, becomes self-conscious and, either remains silent, or bashfully refuses to read. For that reason, it is of the outmost importance that an appropriate environment prevails and all students have the same opportunities to read.

**Second**, the teacher must be *another student* in class. He should only guide his “classmates” when they require it, and suggest, but never impose, reading strategies.

**Third**, texts in reading courses should not be written by teachers for class purposes, because adults can detect if a text belongs to the “real world” source or not. This is the reason why reading material should contain brief, interesting articles taken from scientific, humanistic or cultural publications containing a low degree of difficulty (which will eventually increase). Needless to stress the fact that coherence between the reading material and any pertaining questions is of the outmost importance.

**Fourth**, recognize “cognates”. They are “transparent” words having the same meaning, but missing a letter or two, or having one or two extra ones. It is possible to infer the meaning of a word when it is written almost with the same letters in both languages. Two examples: *arte* means “art” and *estudiante* means “student”. But one should beware of “false cognates”, that is, words that look similar in both languages, but convey a completely different meaning, i.e. *policy*, which some people wrongly translate as *police*.

**Fifth**, in my opinion, all human beings think alike but express their thoughts in a different manner and with different vocabulary. One should always bear in mind that, when reading a sentence or a paragraph, it should make sense. If it doesn’t or lacks coherence when it is being transferred from L2 to one’s own language, the reason may be that a different meaning has been assigned by the reader to a word or phrase. By this I mean that the person’s *inference* goes way too far from the message the text is conveying. If this seems to be the problem, then one should try to look up in the dictionary, those “familiar” words one “seems” to know, because they may be false cognates. Very often, according to its location, a word or phrase may transmit a totally different idea than it does when it is placed in a different context. So once a student is aware that it is not a sign of *weakness* to consult the dictionary to understand the correct meaning, he will keep on doing that and succeed in understanding the written material.

**Sixth**, because of their complexity, irregular verbs should be learned well but never in a list form. They should appear in familiar contexts, that is, students should be able to read them because they are meaningful words when presented in everyday situations; and, when necessary, they may be accompanied by a brief explanation of their role in a sentence.

**Seventh**, because adjectives are used in Spanish after nouns, one must remember that, in English adjectives (regardless of the number that appears), always come before a noun.

**Eighth**, below are several hints regarding verbs ending in “ing” (gerunds). People should bear in mind that some words with that ending, may seem to be nouns, but they actually function as adjectives by being placed before a noun. Here is an example of both uses: This *evening* is her Prom (graduation dance), so she must wear an *evening* dress. The first word evening is used as a noun and the second, as an adjective.

Verbs in English, ending in “ing”, when placed at the beginning of a sentence correspond in Spanish to the infinitive form: *Eating too much is bad for you*: *comer mucho es malo para ti*.

But they may also “act” as nouns: “Their *singing* was awful”

If “ing” words are accompanied by the verb to be (in any tense), they *are* verbs: “They were *eating* a banana.”

**Ninth**, remember that in Spanish, verbs already include the pronoun, so it doesn’t have to be repeated. For example, *juego*, means, I play, but it also can be that *juego* is used as a noun, meaning “game”.

**Tenth**, adverbs are inserted between the pronoun and the verb, that is: I *always* play in the morning, whereas in Spanish, because our verb already shows the corresponding pronoun, as is the case of *juego*, the sentence may start with the adverb *Siempre* and the verb *juego* shows the word already includes the first person singular.

If an “ing” word is accompanied the verb to be, no matter how this verb is conjugated, then that ‘ing’ word functions as a verb: “He will be **playing** the piano.” But it also functions as a noun: “their **singing** was awful!”

**Eleventh**, all regular verbs conjugated in past tense end in *ed*, regardless of the person who is speaking.

**Twelfth**, when auxiliary verbs are being conjugated, they show the tense in which the sentence is presented. Very often people say: “I didn’t **ate** the cookies” when they try to give examples of past tense verbs. Therefore, the use of the present tense for the action verb accompanying the auxiliary, must be remembered: I **didn’t do** my homework.

**Thirteenth**, verbs like “do” and “have” function both as auxiliary and regular verbs. The following examples show the way they are used: “I **don’t** like to *do* homework on weekends” and “I *have* eaten too much and *have* a stomach ache.”

“Have”, followed by “to” is also used as *must* (obligation): “I *have to* finish this paper for tomorrow.” (I *must* finish this paper for tomorrow).

**Fourteenth**, “English is easier to learn than Spanish”. By looking at examples such as: In Spanish we use adjectives according to their gender and number. For example the word *bello* (or *hermoso*) means “beautiful” while in English the adjective does not. If one is talking about a child, that person uses the same adjective regardless of gender or number, whereas in Spanish, a person would have to use the adjective *bello* for a boy, *bella* for a girl, *bellos* for two or more boys and *bellas* for two or more girls. So, it is advisable to stress the fact that one does not have to worry about gender and number regarding adjectives.

## Conclusions

Teaching reading strategies in a foreign language (whether English, French, Italian or Spanish, among others), and presenting a text through situational teaching, is giving students the possibility to be immersed in “familiar learning situations” which they will recognize immediately.

Texts should be chosen carefully according to the students’ requirements and they must be meaningful, interesting and relevant.

The vocabulary presented in the teaching material must be simple at the beginning of the course in order to reduce the learning stress, and it should increase its difficulty as the course continues.

Courses should be taught having the teacher playing the role of one more student in class, being a person who helps his classmates to understand the basic learning process of reading a text.

It must be remembered that a word usually has several meanings and the reader must find the correct one for the text to be coherent.

Both, students and teachers must always be respectful of their classmates' mistakes by omitting the attitude of someone who expects a grown-up perfection when a person reads.

Errors should be empathically corrected, bearing in mind that students have already noticed their failure and expect a respectful attitude.

To motivate and convince students that they are able to read a text in a foreign language with the very little amount of vocabulary they have, is to, psychologically, forcing them to read, even if, at first, the student makes numerous mistakes.

By using the tips given above, one may state that adults are capable to read a foreign language and infer the meaning of unknown words, because they will develop their own learning strategies by comparing the knowledge acquired during their life, to the reading situations that are presented in texts.

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