

3.1. Developing Reading Skills

Session Aims

By the end of the session you will have:

- ☐ a clear picture of what the IELTS reading exam entails
- ☐ identified students' problems and how to deal with them
- ☐ identified the key sub skills tested for reading
- ☐ practised and analysed activities to develop some of these skills

Before we start

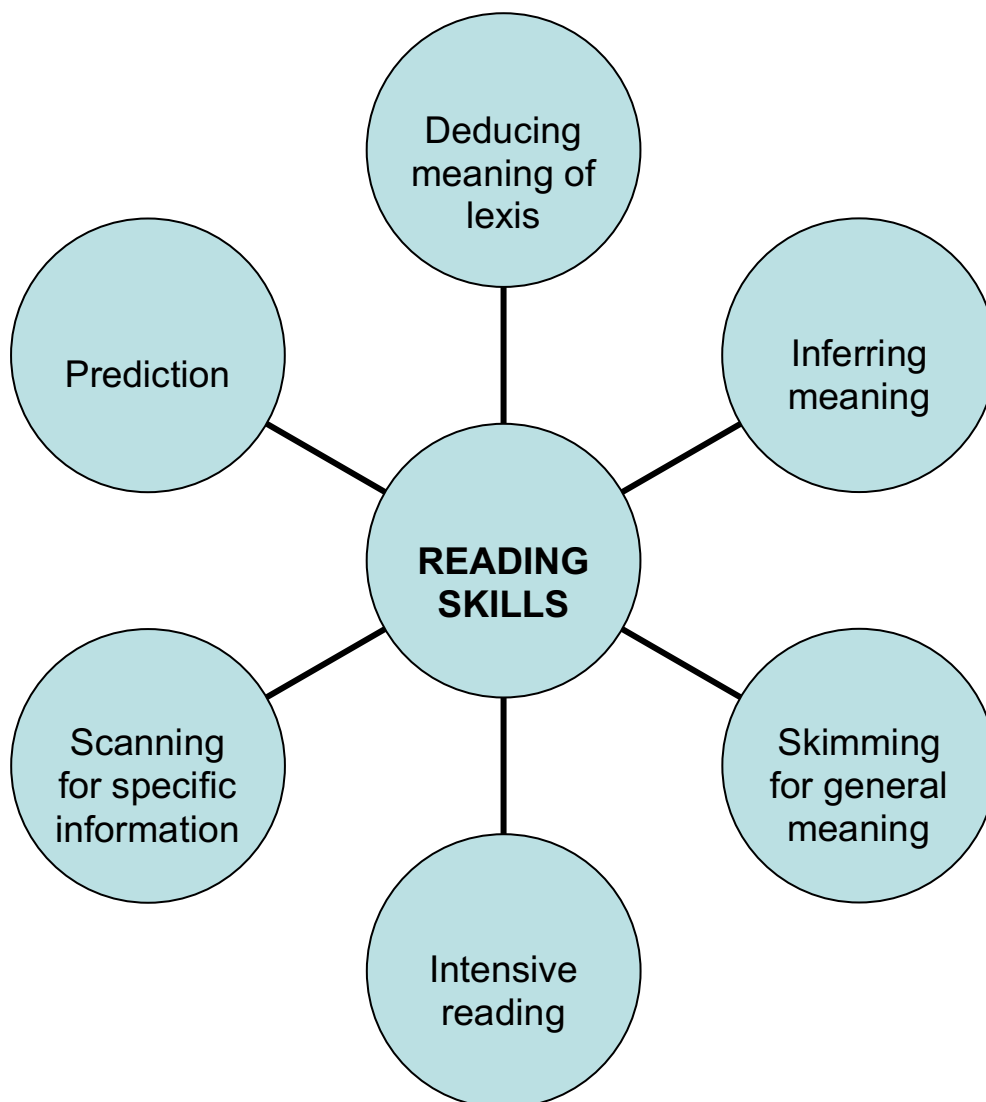
Task 1

Decide if the following statements are true or false, and then read the text you are given quickly to see if your answers were correct.

	True	False
1. The reading paper is 40 minutes long.		
2. There are 60 questions		
3. There are four reading passages.		
4. There can be up to four different question types per passage.		
5. It is important to read every word in the reading passage carefully		
6. The Academic exam has different reading passages to the General Training module.		
7. The reading exam tests your ability to read between 1500 and 2500 words in a short time.		
8. You will have time at the end of the reading exam to fill in your answer sheet.		
9. At least one text in the academic reading has non-verbal materials such as diagrams, graphs or illustrations		
10. One text in the general training reading focuses on the training context.		

Reading Sub Skills

Now let's consider the kind of skills and sub-skills that the students need to develop in order to pass the reading exam successfully. The diagram below illustrates all the skills needed for the reading exam. How similar is it to the listening exam?



Task 1

Your trainer will give you a set of cards which have the skill or sub skill and the definition of that skill. Match the two together.

Task 2

The follow task types are in the IELTS reading component. Quickly write the skill/s needed to attempt the tasks successfully:

Task Types	Skill/s
Match headings from a list with individual paragraphs	
Match summary sentences from a list with individual paragraphs	
Notes / summary / diagram / flow chart / table completion	
Multiple choice questions	
Identifying the writers' views – yes, no or not given	
Gapped text – match missing parts to the gaps	
Short answer questions	
Labelling a diagram	

Now check your answers with your partner.

Activity type: Explicitly identifying sub-skills

- ☐ Is this kind of activity useful for your students?
- ☐ How might you adapt it?
- ☐ What learning points can you take away with you?

Developing Students' Skills

You are going to read a text about developing candidates' skills for the reading examination.

Before you read

Brainstorm five student problems that you predict will be addressed in the article.

Reading for gist

Now read the text quickly and see if your predictions were correct

Reading for specific information

Choose from the list the sentence which best summarises each part 1-8 of the article. There is one extra sentence which you do not need to use. There is an example at the beginning.

1. The IELTS examination aims to test the kinds of reading skills which learners of English need to develop to cope with reading materials in the real world.

Ans: Para A

2. Giving reasons for choosing one answer over another is very useful for students to practise.

Ans:

3. The overall strategies are similar for most tasks – so don't forget them.

Ans:

4. Some tasks give trainers absolute nightmares when they think of them.

Ans:

5. Activating your students' schematic knowledge can give them a head start.

Ans:

6. Discovering synonyms is very important.

Ans:

7. Cultural influences can have some impact on your students' ability to perform well.

Ans:

8. Assessing the general meaning is an essential part of all the tasks.

Ans:

A.....

People in business and industry, scientists, academics, and many other walks of life need to be able to read for a specific purpose quickly and effectively, to extract information without being 'bogged down' in detail and to be able to obtain both the main ideas of a text and on many occasions the specific details. The IELTS examination aims to test these skills required for real life, to ensure that people will be able to perform these skills in English to a satisfactory level. This short article will address some of the problems students face while taking the reading exam and how those problems can be dealt with in the classroom.

B.....

Traditionally, the educational systems in Asia put great importance on such skills as memorising all the details in the text and answering comprehension questions which often only require them to lift whole phrases from the text. This unfortunately means that students have not been taught to develop the reading skills they automatically use when reading in their L₁ and so when it comes to the reading exam, they find the tasks very different to the ones they have been used to. Therefore, students need to know what is expected of them, and to be exposed to each of the task types. They should also be able to talk about what and how they are doing each task, so that it will help them in the exam.

C.....

We also draw on our existing knowledge to interpret a text. If we have a book with a picture of a princess and a castle on the front, we can probably guess correctly that we are going to read a fairy story. We might expect to find the words 'handsome prince' and 'wicked witch', and we could probably guess the outcome of the story. This has implications for the classroom. If the environmental context has been stated and the students' prior knowledge has been activated, it will mean that the students are less dependent on the written words on the page and their disadvantage as L₂ readers will be minimised. It also reflects strategies that L₁ readers employ when they are going to read something.

D.....

It is extremely useful therefore, if IELTS candidates are encouraged to skim through the text as fast as possible before they read the questions. This literally should take a minute or so for each passage – it is an attempt to familiarise them with the text type, content and overall meaning, so that when they come to reading it in more detail, they will find it much easier to do so. Encourage your students to run their fingers down the middle of the passage and flick their eyes from side to side to take in as much as possible. You will be surprised how much the brain can absorb! After all, this is a task we all do in our L₁ every time we open a newspaper.

E.....

One of the main problems that students face in the exam is that they often cannot separate important information from information which is not important. When learners are asked to do matching tasks for example in which they must search for specific detail, it often helps to ask students to justify exactly why they have selected an answer. They should also be encouraged to underline the precise pieces of information in a text which give them the correct answer. This will generally involve no more than two sentences and often just one *keyword* provides the detail required.

F.....

Similarly, students get really caught out by the task which requires them to state whether the writer's opinion is 'true', 'false' or 'not given'. It is often very tricky for them and it gives trainers many sleepless nights wondering about how to develop this skill! First of all make sure your students know what a 'not given' answer actually means. It is not a 'no', but it means that there is nothing in the text about this statement or idea. Highlight the key words in the statements, quickly think of synonyms that may help you locate the place in the text that it comes from. Then read the section you identify carefully before you answer. This strategy is sure to help.

G.....

As already mentioned, the IELTS reading component is not reading for pleasure, but is a test of your students' English ability and academic skills. So, remember the golden rule – look at any pictures and titles first to start you thinking about the topic, then read the question carefully and highlight them so you know what you are going to do. Then, quickly skim through the entire text in a minute or so, before highlighting keywords in the actual questions and at the same time try to predict the type of answers you need to search for. Then, use your reading skills, skimming, scanning and intensive reading to find the answers. Good luck!

Top Ten Takeaway Tips for the Reading Exam

Your trainer will give you a worksheet copied from page 66 of the excellent trainer resource book:

Tasks for Teacher Education: A Reflective Approach by Rosie Tanner and Catherine Green
Longman 1998

Read the strategies listed and decided if you think they are effective or not in the context of the IELTS reading modules.

Reading Session - Action Plan

I learned

When I get back to work I am going to

I would like to know more about

I am going to find out this by