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Academic Achievement

This unit will help students:

- use their prior knowledge to help them understand what they are reading;
- practice reading for a specific purpose;
- make decisions about the relevance of a text in terms of reading purpose;
- read selectively in order to use appropriate information from the text.

The topics and texts in this section are designed to encourage students to read for a specific purpose. The most common reading purpose during university study is to complete written assignments. It is for this reason that *EAS Reading* is linked to the accompanying *EAS Writing* materials. Although the students do not have to complete the writing course alongside *EAS Reading*, it is nevertheless useful to read as if they will be going on to do the specified writing tasks.

The Focus task in Unit 1 of *EAS Writing* is to write a second draft of an essay: *What are the aims of academic study and how can they be achieved?* The students are encouraged to make alterations to their first draft based on reading they carry out in this unit of *EAS Reading*. As parts of the reading text in this unit are more relevant to the writing Focus task than others, students are encouraged to read selectively and to make decisions about which areas of the text are relevant to their writing needs.

Students who are not using *EAS Writing* in conjunction with this course should nevertheless feel that they could be carrying out the reading as writing research to help develop a sense of purpose in reading. In this unit, students are encouraged to read selectively and to make decisions about which areas of the text are relevant to their real or imaginary writing needs.

In most English-medium universities or colleges, an independent learning style will be expected of students undertaking degree courses. Students should be encouraged to make their own decisions about the contents of this text in terms of the Focus task, i.e., whether:

- a) the whole text is useful for their purpose and therefore requires thorough detailed understanding;
- b) only certain parts of the text are particularly relevant.

The text has been chosen with the view that certain areas are more relevant than others and this will become clear as they do the tasks in the unit. However, the decision about which areas are most relevant should ultimately be left to the student.

Text 1-1 The influence of class size on academic achievement

Task 1: Predicting text content

It is intended that after reading the whole article, students can return to this task and reconsider their initial ratings.

- 1.3** After working individually and in pairs, encourage students to suggest other factors as a whole class and reach a consensus about how they should be rated in terms of importance.

Other suggested influences:

- The ratio of teachers to students, i.e., class size
- The socio-economic background of the students
- Parental influence
- Discipline at school and at home

- The ethos/reputation of the school/college
- Funding and support, e.g., from governmental or non-governmental sources

Accept or offer up for discussion any further reasonable suggestions.

Task 2: Reading for a purpose

This task is intended to re-emphasize the need to read for a purpose. Get the students to look at the Focus task, *What are the aims of academic study and how can they be achieved?*, and get them to verbalize exactly what they are aiming to do. They may need to simplify the question in their own words in order to understand fully what to do.

2.1 Remind students of the work they did in the introductory unit about looking at the title of a text as well as subtitles, graphics and other meta-textual features (e.g., tables, figures) in order to make decisions about how to read it.

2.2 Answers:

Possible reasons why the text might be considered useful:

- It deals with a factor that might impact on academic achievement—the reduction of class size.
- It seems to weigh the pros and cons of reducing class size.
- The article refers to studies carried out on the impact of class size on academic achievement in Tennessee, California and Wisconsin.

Possible reasons why the text might not be considered useful:

- It refers to the American school system (but point out that later on in the text, reference is made to other countries).
- It concentrates on school children; relating this to university level might not be considered appropriate.

Task 3: Reading selectively

3.1 Reiterate the strategy of thinking about the content of a text before reading it as a useful way of enhancing understanding. Give students no more than two or three minutes to write down their reasons. Encourage them to write in note form.

3.2 Answers:

- Yes (lines 73–75)
- No
- Yes (lines 77–79; you need to explain *cooperative learning* briefly)
- Yes (lines 81–82)
- Yes (lines 91–92)
- No (this is not mentioned in the text)
- No (the opposite, in fact; lines 106–115)

3.3 Answer:

anecdotal = subjective; unreliable

As the explanations are *anecdotal*, they are not apparently supported by research findings and are, rather, the subjective views of teachers, parents or other interested people. From an academic point of view, such opinions cannot be taken too seriously because they lack concrete evidence, i.e., are not backed by research data.

- 3.4** Students should appreciate that this paragraph could contain some very useful information because it is backed by research.

The information that the students might most usefully highlight includes:

- Lines 108–110: "... the improvement in academic performance was negligible";
- Lines 109–115: "... data from ... a series of tests ... show no significant gains";
- Line 117: "... performance actually decreased slightly."

Task 4: Identifying the writer's purpose

4.1 Answers:

The *main* function of the text is to evaluate the importance of the research.

Lines 122–123, "... pay little attention to these figures ...," indicate the evaluative/analytical content of this section. Clearly, the evaluation is critical at this stage. Lines 123–148 provide a range of reasons why research needs to be evaluated.

Lines 149–168 continue to provide a negative view of research carried out on class size. Encourage students to recognize the negative comments being used and highlight this language in the text.

The second main function of the text would appear to be d), to describe the research method.

This is shown from line 156 onwards. First the text explains the weakness of the methods being used, but then a more detailed description is given of the method used for the STAR research project (lines 168–192).

Students may also feel that the first function in the table could be considered a function of the text. Certainly, the writers express an opinion in carrying out their analysis of the research data and methods employed.

It is also important not to neglect choice b) in discussion with the class. Emphasize how research data is the vital evidence in academic work and carries far more weight than information that is purely based on impressions.

- 4.2** Get students to justify their choice of function(s).

Answer:

In this case, b) and d) could both be considered correct.

Explain to students that tables and figures are intended to enhance or clarify the content of the text and should not be ignored for this reason. Studying graphics and tables is another strategy to be employed when reading for quick, general understanding or decision-making about the relevance of a text.

Task 5: Understanding referencing in texts

Try to photocopy and display a section of text either on an overhead transparency (OHT) or as a handout and get students to identify referents, such as *their*, *this*, *she*, at some stage of this activity.

5.1 Answer:

a)

5.2 Answers:

- b) these figures (line 123)
- c) these data (lines 133–134)

If this is the first time that text referencing has been introduced to students, it might be a good idea to get them to highlight the relevant words in the text and link them with arrows to the research they are referring to.

If more practice is necessary, encourage students to find further examples of referents in this section of the text and to discuss them. For example, *other factors* (line 153) refers to the information in the second paragraph; *most* (line 159) refers to “hundreds of studies and analyses,” as does *most of these studies* (line 163), *a number of studies* (line 166) and *too few* (line 167).

- 5.3 As it is important that students concentrate on their reading skills, encourage them to use note form and as few words as possible to indicate their answers. If the students are also studying the Writing section, they will be able to improve their writing when they carry out the writing assignment in the relevant unit.

Answers:

- a) Decreased dropout rates
- b) Students’ family commitments
- c) Language background of students
- d) Higher parental education level
- e) More experienced teachers

- 5.4 Again, encourage students to use note form.

Answers:

- a) Children randomly assigned to three class sizes
- b) The research was carried out over a number of years
- c) Teachers randomly assigned to classes
- d) Few teachers specially trained
- e) No new curricular methods

Text 1-2 A case study: Shining star

Task 6: Reading a text for closer understanding (1)

6.1 Answers:

There is disagreement among researchers about the benefits of class size on academic performance.
The most succinct phrase is “the collected findings have yielded no consensus” (lines 9–10).

6.2 Answers:

- a) True (lines 16–18)
- b) True (lines 20 and 32)
- c) True (lines 21–23)
- d) False
- e) True (lines 37–40)
- f) False (lines 40–42)