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TEACHING READING SKILLS: FROM DECODING TO UNDERSTANDING

Abstract. The article presents a comprehensive hierarchy of reading skills, from basic text decoding to in-depth critical understanding, within the framework of teaching English according to the CEFR scale. The model is built on nine interconnected blocks of skills. The first component – *Decoding Skills* (phonological awareness, phonics, sight word recognition, morphemic analysis) – creates the technical foundation at levels A1–A2, allowing students to quickly turn written letters into sounds and grasp basic meanings. The second component – *Fluency* (speed, accuracy, prosody) – ensures smooth, natural reading and frees up mental resources for deeper understanding of the text. The third component – *Vocabulary Development* – strengthens technical skills through conscious work with word meanings, common word combinations, word-building patterns, and context clues. At the start of level B1, these three elements move into the fourth component – *Comprehension Skills* (main idea, details, inference, sequence, comparison, cause and effect, fact vs opinion), which forms the core of meaningful reading. The fifth component – *Purpose* – teaches students to strategically switch reading styles (skimming, scanning, predicting, summarizing) depending on the goal. At levels B2–C1, the sixth component – *Literary Skills* – is activated: students learn to analyze characters, plot, themes, symbols, setting, author's tone, point of view, and literary devices, which broadens their cultural and aesthetic understanding of texts. The seventh component – *Metacognitive Skills* – includes self-monitoring, self-correction, and conscious choice of strategies; it turns the reader into an active manager of their own understanding. The eighth component – *Culture and Intertextual Understanding* – helps students connect the text's meaning with its historical, social, and cultural background, and with other texts they know. The final, ninth component – *Critical Reading* – covers evaluation, analysis, and synthesis of information, which develops the ability to make reasoned judgments and combine information from different sources at level C2. The model shows a gradual layering of skills, where each level serves as a “supporting platform” for more complex tasks.

The result is a reader who can not only technically read a text but also understand its cultural codes, judge its credibility, compare it with other sources, and form their own opinion. The proposed structure can be integrated into general and professionally oriented English (ESP) programs, providing a continuous pathway for developing reading competence from A1 to C2.

Keywords: decoding; fluency; vocabulary development; comprehension; purpose; literary skills; metacognitive strategies; culture context; intertextual; critical reading.

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НАВЧАННЯ НАВИЧКАМ ЧИТАННЯ: ВІД ДЕКОДУВАННЯ ДО РОЗУМІННЯ

Анотація. У статті висвітлено цілісну ієрархію читальних умінь, від початкового декодування тексту до поглибленого критичного осмислення, у межах навчання англійської мови за шкалою CEFR. Модель спирається на дев'ять взаємопов'язаних блоків навичок. Перший компонент – *Decoding Skills* (фонологічна обізнаність, фонікс, впізнавання зорових слів, морфемний аналіз) – формує технічний фундамент рівнів A1–A2, дозволяючи швидко перетворювати графічний знак у звук і базово розуміти значення. Другий компонент – *Fluency* (швидкість, точність, просодія) – забезпечує автономне, ритмічне читання і вивільняє когнітивні ресурси для глибшої роботи з текстом. Третій компонент – *Vocabulary Development* – підсилює технічні вміння через свідоме оперування значеннями, колокаціями, словотвірними схемами та контекстуальними підказками. На порозі рівня B1 ці три елементи переходять у четвертий компонент – *Comprehension Skills* (головна ідея, деталі, інференція, послідовність, порівняння, причина-наслідок, факт vs думка), який формує ядро усвідомленого читання. П'ятий компонент – *Purpose* – навчає стратегічно змінювати стиль читання (*skimming, scanning, predicting, summarizing*) залежно від поставленої задачі. На рівнях B2–C1 активізується шостий компонент – *Literary Skills*: учні аналізують персонажів, сюжет, теми, символіку, атмосферу, авторський тон, точку зору та художні засоби, що розширює естетичне й культурне бачення тексту. Сьомий компонент – *Metacognitive Skills* – включає самоспостереження, самокорекцію та свідомий вибір стратегій; він перетворює читача на активного керівника власного розуміння. Восьмий компонент – *Culture and Intertextual Understanding* – допомагає узгоджувати зміст прочитаного з



історичним, соціокультурним і міжтекстовим контекстами. Фінальний, дев'ятий компонент – *Critical Reading* – охоплює оцінювання, аналіз та синтез інформації, що формує здатність до аргументованого судження й інтеграції різних джерел на рівні C2. Таким чином, модель демонструє поступове нашарування навичок, у якому кожен попередній рівень слугує «опорною платформою» для складніших операцій. Результат – читач, здатний не лише технічно прочитати текст, а й усвідомити його культурні коди, оцінити достовірність, зіставити з іншими джерелами та сформулювати власну позицію. Запропонована структура може бути інтегрована у програми загальної та професійно-спрямованої англійської (ESP), забезпечуючи безперервну вертикаль розвитку компетентності читання від A1 до C2.

Ключові слова: декодування; плавність; розвиток словникового запасу; розуміння тексту; мета; літературні навички; метакогнітивні стратегії; культурний контекст; інтертекстуальність; критичне читання.

Problem Statement. Over the past decade, the amount of text information that an average person encounters has grown exponentially, and the formats for presenting this information have become more fragmented and multimedia-based [13]. Despite this, teaching methods for reading still tend to follow the traditional sequence of “decoding → translation → answering questions,” which overlooks the critical, cultural, and metacognitive aspects of text processing. International studies emphasize that without developing strategic and critical reading skills, learners remain vulnerable to manipulative content and are unable to learn effectively throughout their lives [5; 12]. The link between the size of a learner’s active vocabulary and the speed of decoding has long been proven [9], but a large vocabulary alone does not guarantee understanding of deeper meanings or intertextual references [8]. In Ukrainian educational practice, the situation is complicated by an uneven distribution of class hours: significantly more time is given to phonics and vocabulary-grammar drills than to developing deep text comprehension. Therefore, there is a clear need for a model that integrates technical, semantic, and critical reading skills across all CEFR levels and is adapted for both general and professionally oriented (ESP) English courses.

Review of Recent Research and Publications. The global academic community offers many approaches to the step-by-step development of reading skills. Anderson’s study shows how active reading exercises increase student engagement, while Day and Bamford highlight the benefits of extensive reading for automating decoding; we integrate both approaches at A1–A2 levels as part of a foundational “reading diet” [1; 3]. The schema theory by Carrell and Eisterhold emphasizes that prior knowledge helps build meaning frameworks, which in our model serves as a foundation for making inferences at B1–B2 levels [2]. The

cognitive interaction models of text processing proposed by Kintsch and Perfetti form the basis for understanding how technical decoding evolves into deeper comprehension [7; 10]. Motivation strategies for reading described by Guthrie and Wigfield suggested ways to sustain interest at every stage, while Duke's research demonstrated the need for early training in comprehension strategies to strengthen understanding of longer texts [6; 4]. The work of Pressley and Afflerbach on "think-aloud" protocols showed how to diagnose and adjust metacognitive strategies – a tool we recommend introducing from the B1 level [11]. Finally, Wolf's warning about the risks of "shallow" digital reading justifies the inclusion of exercises for slow, analytical reading at C1–C2 levels [13].

The aim of this article is to develop a comprehensive, step-by-step model for teaching reading that combines technical decoding, semantic integration, and critical, cultural, and metacognitive understanding of texts; it is based on empirical data from cognitive psychology and language teaching; it adapts international approaches (Anderson, Day & Bamford, Grabe & Stoller, Nation, Wolf) to the Ukrainian educational context; and it offers teachers practical algorithms for gradually introducing cultural, intertextual, and critical strategies starting at the B1 level, in order to ensure continuous, vertical development of reading skills from A1 to C2.

Main Part. Mastering reading skills in a foreign language is a gradual, structured, multi-level process that covers both technical and cognitive components. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the development of these skills can be roughly divided into three broad stages corresponding to levels A1–A2, B1–B2, and C1–C2. This division helps to better understand the dynamics of reading competence formation and identify optimal teaching tools for each stage of learning.

At the beginner level (A1–A2), the main focus is on basic skills without which meaningful reading is impossible. This primarily involves *decoding*, developing reading *fluency*, and expanding *vocabulary*. These skills create the foundation for technically reading text, understanding familiar words and phrases, and moving on to processing meaning. Teaching at this stage centers on developing phonological awareness, grapheme-phoneme correspondences, morphemic analysis, and expressive intonation.

Decoding is the first step in learning to read. Imagine you see a new word. To read it, you must first recognize the letters, then understand what sounds they make, and finally blend these sounds into a meaningful word. That's what decoding does – it helps "translate" the written form into sound and meaning.

A key element here is *phonological awareness*, or the ability to hear and distinguish individual sounds in words. For example, children learn that the word *dog* has three sounds: /d/, /ɒ/, /g/. This skill is the basis for all further reading.



The second step is **phonics**, which is learning how sounds connect to letters. For example, a student learns that the letter “b” usually represents the /b/ sound. This way, they begin to “sound out” words letter by letter. This is especially important in English, where many words aren’t pronounced the way they’re spelled.

Another important aspect is **sight word recognition**. Some words appear so often that it’s better to memorize them as a “picture” instead of sounding them out every time. For example, the word *the* doesn’t follow regular pronunciation rules, so students learn it as a whole. This greatly speeds up reading.

Finally, **morphemic analysis** means breaking words into parts: root, prefix, and suffix. For example, in *replayed* we have the prefix *re-* (again), the root *play*, and the suffix *-ed* (past tense). Knowing these parts helps students figure out new words even without a dictionary.

Together, these skills form the basic level without which it’s impossible to move on to more complex tasks like understanding meaning, analyzing text, or reading critically.

Reading **fluency** is the bridge between being able to “sound out” words and truly understanding what they mean. It includes three indicators: *rate (speed)*, *accuracy*, and *prosody (intonation)*. When all three work together, the reader moves through text smoothly, without stumbling over every second word, and sounds natural—almost like in conversation.

Rate means how smoothly we move through lines of text. If you read too slowly, your brain focuses on decoding details and can’t keep up with the story. That’s why teachers often suggest repeated readings: the student rereads a passage several times, times words per minute, and sees their speed gradually improve.

Accuracy is the ability to recognize words without mistakes. Flashcards, “hot word” drills, or quick-search word games help with this. As errors decrease, it becomes easier to piece together the meaning of the text.

Prosody is intonation, pauses, and stress. Imagine two students reading the same dialogue: one speaks in a flat, monotonous voice, the other changes pitch and pauses before important phrases. The second almost always understands the meaning better because proper prosody signals logical connections and the author’s emotional tone.

Teachers train prosody using “echo reading,” where the teacher reads a sentence with good intonation and the class immediately repeats it.

When rate, accuracy, and prosody are balanced, the reader frees up cognitive resources for deeper analysis: instead of fighting over each word, they can follow the story, draw conclusions, and evaluate credibility. That’s why training fluency is a key step between basic decoding and real critical reading.

Vocabulary development isn't just memorizing word lists. It's a holistic process that helps the reader understand meanings, use words correctly, recognize shared elements in different words, and even guess the meaning of unknown words without a dictionary. This is essential for moving confidently through a text instead of getting stuck on every second line.

First, the reader needs to know *word meanings*. This is the basic level: knowing, for example, that *transform* means "to change." But just knowing that isn't enough – they also need to know how the *word is used*. For example, *transform a space* or *transform an idea* – the same word behaves slightly differently depending on context. Students learn to feel when a word sounds natural or awkward.

Next comes working with *word parts*. This means recognizing, for instance, that *unbelievable* has three parts: *un-* (negative), *believe* (root), and *-able* (possible). If you know these, you can guess that *unachievable* or *disbeliever* have similar meanings. This is especially helpful in academic and technical texts where new words often combine known morphemes.

Finally, *context clues* are a real lifesaver in authentic reading. When a student sees an unfamiliar word, they look for hints in the sentence: synonyms, antonyms, examples. For instance, in *He was elated, overjoyed at the news*, even if you don't know *elated*, you can guess it means something like intense happiness. Exercises like "missing word" tasks, or analyzing adjectives and comparisons in a text, help build this skill.

When vocabulary develops in all four directions, students become not just technically stronger, but able to read with nuance and understand the author's style.

As students move into levels B1–B2, the focus of instruction shifts to developing more complex cognitive skills related to *understanding* the text and recognizing the *purpose* of reading. This stage marks the transition from technical processing of the text to semantic processing: the reader not only recognizes words but can integrate different parts of the text into a cohesive meaning. Strategies become necessary to adapt reading style to specific goals – from skimming for a general overview to scanning for specific details.

Comprehension skills are the heart of what we call "conscious reading." While decoding skills let you "read" words and vocabulary helps you understand them, comprehension skills allow you to piece together the entire text into a connected meaning. These abilities are essential so that you're not just turning pages but truly understanding what the author says and why it matters.

First, the student must learn to find the *main idea* – answering the question: What is this text about overall? Exercises for this include summarizing a topic in one sentence or creating a title. Alongside this comes the ability to identify *details*



– specific facts, names, dates, or examples that support the main idea. Without these details, understanding stays superficial.

Next is *inference*, or reading “between the lines.” This is guessing based on hints in the text and your own experience. For example, if a story says the character “closed the door and sighed with relief,” you can infer he was stressed before – though it’s not said directly. Inference is trained through questions like: “What probably happened next?” or “Why did the character act this way?”

It’s also important to recognize the *sequence* of events. In complex texts or scientific reports, losing the order of events leads to confusion. That’s why students practice identifying key events and putting them in the correct order. *Comparison* is another tool: it helps readers see similarities and differences between events, phenomena, or characters.

Understanding *cause and effect* means recognizing what led to what. For instance, in a science text: “due to rising temperatures... glacier melting accelerated.” This isn’t just grammar but a logical foundation for understanding.

Finally, students need to distinguish *fact from opinion* – especially important when reading news or persuasive texts. “Rainfall increased by 12%” is a fact. “This is disastrous for the economy” is an opinion. Recognizing this difference helps readers stay critical and avoid mistaking subjective statements for absolute truth.

Developed comprehension skills are not just signs of a good reader. They show the ability to think logically, see cause-and-effect relationships, and separate facts from judgments – skills that help people navigate today’s information-rich world.

Reading with a **purpose** means every reading act has a goal. The clearer the reader understands their goal, the more effectively they work with the text. Skills related to reading purpose help choose the right strategy: you don’t always need to read every word slowly from start to finish. Sometimes you need a specific phrase, sometimes a general impression, and sometimes a quick prediction or summary. These are different reading styles.

Skimming is quickly glancing over text to get the main idea. Imagine flipping through a magazine to find an article that interests you. You check headlines, first sentences of paragraphs, keywords. That’s skimming. It’s trained with exercises like “find the main idea in 30 seconds.”

Scanning is the opposite: not for overall meaning but for specific information. For example, finding the year an event happened. You don’t read everything – you “scan” for numbers or keywords. Students practice spotting visual cues like dates, names, headings, or numbered lists.

Predicting is guessing what comes next. Based on a title, first paragraph, or familiar topic, students make predictions. It’s not just a game: predicting

activates prior knowledge, increases interest, and improves retention. For example, before reading about “historical pandemics,” a student might guess the text will mention the Black Death or Spanish flu.

Summarizing is writing a brief retelling. After reading, the student states the main idea in a few sentences. It’s important not to lose the meaning or overload with details. Summarizing is one of the most valuable skills because it helps remember the essence without constantly rereading.

When students can skim quickly, scan for details, predict logically, and summarize concisely, they become not just good readers but strategic readers – skills that transfer to any area from education to professional life.

At levels C1–C2, readers develop the highest level of reading competence, which includes *literary skills, metacognitive skills, culture and intertextual understanding, and critical reception of texts*. These skills require not just advanced language ability but also the capacity to interpret, reflect, analyze connections between texts, evaluate the reliability of sources, and form personal opinions based on what was read. At this level, reading becomes an intellectual activity closely linked to personal experience, cultural awareness, and critical thinking.

Literary skills let readers not just understand “what happened in the story” but go deeper into its meaning, structure, language, and subtext. These skills aren’t only important in literature classes – they build emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and the ability to interpret complex ideas in any context.

It starts with **character analysis**. Students learn to describe traits, motivations, and changes that happen to characters during the story. For example, why does a calm character suddenly act aggressively? What pushes them? Answering these questions reveals the depth of human behavior.

Next is **plot structure**, which covers the sequence of events, rising tension, conflicts, climax, and resolution. Students might draw a plot diagram (like Freytag’s pyramid) to visualize how drama unfolds – not just in stories but also in speeches, movies, or even advertisements.

Theme and motif answer: “What is this text really about?” – not just the plot but the big ideas like freedom, loss, loneliness, or struggle. For instance, a novel may have many events, but the main theme might be the father-son relationship. Motifs are repeated elements that reinforce the theme, like the image of a road symbolizing change.

Symbolism is recognizing when objects carry extra meaning. For example, a rose often symbolizes love in poetry, while night can symbolize fear or the unknown. Knowing symbols broadens interpretation.

Setting and atmosphere is not just about “where and when” events happen but the overall mood. By studying atmosphere, we understand why a scene feels tense or calm.



Author's style and tone mean looking at not just what's written but how it's written. For example, does the author use formal or humorous language? Do they repeat certain words for emphasis? This helps detect the author's stance or irony.

Point of view involves understanding who tells the story: a character, an observer, or the author themselves – and how this influences what the reader learns. For instance, first-person narration feels more personal but can be biased.

Literary devices are language tools like metaphors, similes, alliteration, and hyperbole. Recognizing and analyzing them develops sensitivity to style and helps students create expressive texts themselves.

So literary skills aren't just about "literature." They build deep thinking, attention to detail, empathy, and the ability to work with layered, indirect meanings – skills essential for the 21st century.

Metacognitive skills are the ability to "think about your own thinking." In reading, they mean not just understanding a text but being aware of how you understand it, noticing when you don't, and knowing how to fix it. They act as an inner "navigator" that helps readers stay focused and adjust their reading strategies in real time.

The first key skill is **self-monitoring** – catching moments when you realize you're no longer following the text. For example, a student notices they've been reading but aren't absorbing anything. Recognizing this is a step toward metacognitive maturity. In class, this is trained through simple questions like "Can I retell what I just read?"

Next is **self-correcting**, when the reader goes back to unclear parts, rereads more carefully, looks for clues, uses a dictionary, or asks clarifying questions like "Did I really understand who is speaking here?" or "What does this term mean in this context?"

Finally, readers need to know **understanding strategies** – techniques to help process complex texts: making diagrams, taking notes, highlighting keywords, writing questions for each paragraph, or visualizing information in drawings or charts.

For instance, a student preparing for a seminar might create a mind map with the main idea in the center and key points branching out.

Metacognitive skills don't develop automatically – they require intentional practice. But they separate passive readers, who just follow along, from active readers who control their reading, learn effectively, and improve with each text.

Cultural and intertextual understanding is the ability to see beyond the words of a text to a broader world: historical, cultural, social, or even literary. At this level, readers start to understand why the author writes a certain way, what cultural codes are hidden in the text, and what other texts it relates to.

Cultural context is knowing about the country, era, customs, or social values in which the text was written. For example, when a British novel mentions “tea at five,” it’s not just a detail but a cultural tradition. Or in an American article referencing the “First Amendment,” knowing it refers to the U.S. Constitution is key to understanding the meaning. In teaching, it’s important to create “cultural capsules” – short explanations about the historical or social background to help readers grasp deeper layers of meaning.

Intertextuality is recognizing how one text echoes another. This could be direct quotes, allusions, similar plots, or characters. For example, if a modern novel’s character says they feel like Hamlet, it references Shakespeare’s character. Readers familiar with Hamlet’s doubts will instantly understand the character’s inner conflict. This skill can be built through questions like “Does this text remind you of another?” or “Which phrases or images feel familiar?”

Mastering these skills helps readers become culturally aware, recognize subtext, and dive deeper into meaning. It broadens thinking and allows readers to see texts as part of a larger conversation across eras, cultures, ideas, and genres.

Critical reading is the ability not just to read a text but to question it: Can I trust this? Why did the author write it this way? Which arguments are strong and which are weak? This skill turns a passive reader into an active thinker – and in today’s information age, it’s not just useful but essential.

The first step is **evaluation**, where students learn to judge the reliability and quality of a text. This involves checking factors like source credibility, relevance, accuracy, and purpose. For example, when reading an online article, students should ask: Who wrote this? When was it published? Is this information supported by other sources? In class, tools like the CRAAP test (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose) are used.

Then comes **analysis**, where students break down a text into parts: finding the structure, identifying main ideas, spotting logical flow, noticing tone, examples, and stylistic devices. For instance, in an essay, students can see how the author introduces facts, then quotes experts, then adds personal commentary. Readers must notice these layers and understand how they work together.

The final level is **synthesis** – combining information from different sources to build a personal understanding. For example, a student reads several articles about the same global conflict, compares perspectives, checks historical facts, and creates their own conclusions. This isn’t just reading – it’s creating new knowledge.

Critical reading is a skill that goes beyond school or university. It’s needed for decision-making, evaluating news, working with research, voting, or even everyday conversations. A person who can read critically is a person who can think.



Considering all these aspects, an effective reading methodology must go beyond traditional vocabulary and grammar drills to become a comprehensive system for building academic and critical literacy.

Conclusions. An analysis of the development of reading skills in a foreign language shows that effective reading competence requires a step-by-step progression – from basic decoding techniques to advanced cognitive strategies for critical and analytical reading. Each stage of learning provides a foundation for the next and directly affects how well a reader understands texts at levels A1 through C2 according to the CEFR scale.

Basic skills like decoding, reading fluency, and vocabulary development form the technical base for deeper semantic work, which at B1–B2 levels includes integrating strategies for making inferences, structuring texts, and identifying main ideas.

The highest level, C1–C2, is achieved through mastering literary, metacognitive, cultural, and critical skills, which enable learners not only to interpret content but also to evaluate its quality, draw conclusions, and connect what they read to their personal and professional lives.

The proposed model demonstrates that only a comprehensive approach to reading development, where technical, cognitive, and critical strategies work together as a unified system, can cultivate a competent reader who is able to adapt to the complex information challenges of today's world and use a foreign language effectively in both academic and professional contexts.

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