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SQ4R: An old active reading technique worth teaching in today's CLIL classes

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Introduction

Based on his research in the 1940s, Ohio State University psychologist Francis P. Robinson devised a study method he called the SQ3R method (or SQRRR - survey, question, read, recite/retrieve, review) to help military personnel learn specialized skills in as little time as possible. In his commentary ahead of Veteran's Day in 2002, adult literacy specialist Thomas G. Sticht called it "The reading formula that helped win World War II" (2002, p.18).

Multiple spin-offs of the SQ3R method, including PQRS (preview, question, read, self-review, test) and SQ4R (explained below), have been developed over the years since World War II. All of these critical reading techniques provide a systematic approach to reading, suggesting the reader write down a set of questions first and then read actively with the aim of answering those questions. For language learners, these forms of active reading are highly appropriate for learners in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), EMI (English Medium Instruction), or CBI (Content Based Instruction) courses – where students are not only reading to understand language, but also, and sometimes more importantly, to understand the content conveyed through the language.

Not all English language instructors explicitly teach learners how to read strategically. They certainly help students learn the language necessary to read and understand text, but not necessarily the strategies necessary to comprehend the meaning transferred through the text. This is not to say that language instructors never embed strategies into their teaching materials. Typical reading materials for foreign language instruction include a mixture of the following: pre-reading sections to activate learners' prior knowledge, to pre-teach key vocabulary, and to preview the text; the text itself, which is often already adorned with notes

in the margins, highlighted sections, and footnotes; comprehension checks in a variety of formats; and follow-up questions or projects for deeper understanding, analysis, or reflection.

However, what happens when the student is cast out of this L2 (second language) reading approach into a less-scaffolded EMI environment? The learner is often presented with text all by itself, crutches removed. Many learners will have internalized what they need to do after repeated subjection to processes presented in the language classroom. However, there are those who will also not have made the connection. Still others may not have had adequate L2 reading exposure to allow them to make these connections. Exacerbating the problem, content specialists in a CLIL or EMI environment, or even those teaching in a learning environment where the learners all have the same L1 (first language), may assume learners already possess a modicum of reading ability, when in fact they do not.

At Miyazaki International College (MIC), students tend to start from a generally low proficiency in English (CEFR A1 or A2), and have only three semesters of English language immersion before they are thrust into purely content courses with, in theory, little to no language support. Language instructors can afford little time for the explicit instruction of reading strategies to freshmen and sophomore students when there is a plethora of other basic language objectives to cover. Nonetheless, knowing how to read strategically is of great importance to MIC students. With this skill, learners are better able to understand and recall more of what they read. Without this skill, learners may falsely assume that simply reading and re-reading the material is an effective way to understand and learn. This is why instructors who are content specialists, in addition to EFL instructors, can benefit from familiarity with one or more strategic reading techniques so that they are better equipped to help students in a CLIL environment. This paper outlines one such active reading technique – SQ4R – and provides simple suggestions for widely implementing its instruction.

What is SQ4R?

The origins of the extra “R” that has been added to the original SQ3R are difficult to trace. Moreover, different scholars and practitioners appear to have ascribed different words and meanings to each of the Rs in the acronym (see Pauk, 2010 and Handoko, 2017). However, Google searches show that SQ4R most commonly stands for survey, question, read, record,

recite, and review: survey the chapter, article, story, etc.; write questions for each heading or section; read the text in parts, sections, or chunks; record by taking notes of important information; recite notes out loud; review the questions previously made and attempt to answer them.

1. Survey

Surveying helps readers determine the organization of the text and what they must learn so that they are better able to grasp the main ideas. Readers take a few minutes to read the introduction, headings, subheadings, and the summary or conclusion. They also glance at graphs, photos, charts, and other images, and skim any captions to help with visualizing information. These actions allow learners to make sense of the text when they proceed to read it.

2. Question

Next, readers change any headings, subheadings, or topic sentences into questions that they write down, using the basic questions words who, what, when, where, why, and how. These questions are regularly referred to as learners read the text. In addition, readers ask themselves what they may already know about the topic of the text, which helps them to associate new information with previously acquired information. Creating these associations makes new information easier to remember and helps the reader know what to give attention to as they read.

3. Read

Now that learners are prepared to read the text, they do so attentively, looking for answers to the questions they prepared earlier as well as other important points and ideas. They read one manageable section or chunk of text at a time, keeping their questions in mind.

4. Record

Readers take notes while they read, recording definitions, explanations, facts, and details of ideas or concepts detailed in the text. They use single words or short phrases as opposed to full sentences in order to be concise and save time. If there is something they do not understand, they can make note of that fact by adding it to their list of questions.

5. Recite

Students recite their notes by reading them out loud after finishing each section or chunk of the text. Reciting deepens connections in the brain between what the reader already knows

and what they are reading, helping with long term retention. By imagining they are teaching what they have learned in simple English to a peer, or better still, to a child, learners further deepen their learning (Crew, 2018).

6. Review

After completing a few sections or chunks of the text, readers now return their attention to the questions they created and try to answer them out loud. This process reinforces the connections they made in the previous step. They go back to their notes, or even reread parts of the text if necessary, until they have confidence in their mastery of the content. If uncertainty remains, learners may need to consult with teachers or with additional sources to find answers.

Students repeat the process from step number two (or three, four, or five -- depending on the student's assessment of their own needs), until the text in its entirety has been successfully understood.

Teaching SQ4R

Although English language and literature instructors may be more in tune with the potential need to explicitly teach reading strategies, for some content instructors, there might be more desire to devote class time to covering the content they teach. In the long run, however, courses that demand learning through reading will be much more beneficial to students if students have sufficient reading skills.

For this reason, strategic teaching of content is essential. Flipping instruction, for example, could allow instructors to teach the SQR4 technique and save class time. Students could watch a pre-recorded lecture or video about the technique at home and be asked to answer questions on it or attempt to summarize it (I have created a video about SQ4R for EFL learners here: <https://youtu.be/Vq19QIlx0iE>). Better still, and more appropriately, students can read about the technique, using the technique itself to tackle the text (a meta approach). It is helpful if instructors explain the rationale for the technique. If learners are convinced by its potential for success, they will be more likely to buy into a strategy that will take more time and effort than that to which they may be accustomed. Students should also be encouraged to adapt the technique in any way they see fit, provided that they are still able to achieve learning outcomes.

I believe using a template to scaffold the SQ4R experience is a helpful way to introduce the technique to learners when reading course content. A template provides prompts for students to refer to as they set about the task of reading for meaning. As students become more experienced with SQ4R, this template can be pulled away. Much like the reading exercises used by language instructors outlined at the beginning of this article, a template like this is a crutch of sorts, but the onus for deciding what is important and how to extract that information is more on the learners. (A template that I created for my students is in the Appendix.)

Conclusion

The SQ4R method is a form of active learning that suits an individual's study preferences. It helps learners with long-term recall, prompts them to create study materials to prepare for testing, and helps them to diagnose mistakes in their understanding as well as to purge any areas of confusion.

The method does indeed take some time for students to learn and requires mental energy. Learners may not implicitly understand its benefits and therefore elect not to do it due to the time and effort required. It can also be done badly. For example, learners could mark or highlight their text too much, without being mindful or engaging with the content. Instructors need to remind learners that although applying the six steps may feel strange or time-consuming, the SQ4R method will become natural if they keep at it. Learners may also need to be reminded that they can adapt the six steps. SQ4R, like similar reading strategies or techniques, is meant as a tool or guideline, not a rule that must be accurately followed to perfection.

Appendix

SQ4R Template

<p>1. SURVEY: <i>SKIM, SCAN or PREVIEW for overview of content and purpose. Check meaning of key terms.</i></p>	
<p>What do I already know?</p>	<p>What do I predict I might learn?</p>
<p>2. QUESTIONS: Write questions: <i>What? When? Who? Where? Why? How?</i></p>	
<p>3. READ: <i>Answer questions raised, scan for specific information, skim for main ideas.</i></p>	
<p>4. RECORD: <i>While you read, write annotations in your text (highlight, circle, underline; write synonyms, antonyms, definitions, notes, translations between the lines or in the margins), take notes on paper or using a laptop.</i></p>	
<p>5. RECITE: <i>Teach the key concepts to a partner/ classmate/ friend. (You can also RESTATE in writing the main idea(s) and key concepts in your own words (notes/ diagram/ mind-map).)</i></p>	

6. REVIEW: *REREAD* your notes. You might want to *REVISE* them for study later. Review your reading objectives questions asked earlier. Write a paragraph summary. Also, *RELATE* and *REFLECT* by making connections with what you already know about the topic and how you will use this new information.

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