

## Choosing reading texts for the language classroom: Is simplification a complication?

Lori Rink

Reading is a vital skill, whether in a first or second language. Through reading, everyday tasks are undertaken and completed, such as using a map or following written directions, taking the correct amount of a prescription, calling a business listed in the phonebook, exploring the Internet for news or information, or reading a newspaper headline. Therefore, it is imperative to encourage language learners to become competent readers in their second language, particularly if these students want to use English in social, educational, or professional settings.

### **Extensive Reading**

One way to promote reading competency is to use extensive reading in the language classroom. Extensive reading is defined as reading novel-length materials for pleasure while focusing on the meaning of the text rather than on the linguistic features and their roles in the text. In its purist form, it is reading a large amount of self-selected materials for pleasure at a consistent pace (Day & Bamford, 1998) and is different from intensive reading in that the purpose of reading is to focus on the text's message rather than on individual words and their linguistic roles within the passage or text (Bamford & Day, 1997). For this paper, extensive reading encompasses both individual pleasure reading outside of the class and the use of novel-length literary texts in the ESL classroom.

Students can evolve from beginning readers to experienced readers through extensive reading. While beginning readers may approach reading with bottom-up strategies: reading word for word, using a dictionary

for direct translation, or focusing on the surface structures of the text, experienced readers may also use top-down approaches, such as contextual guessing or predicting. It is important to teach both intensive and extensive reading in the ESL classroom in order to provide students with any and all necessary strategies for understanding a text. Because intensive reading facilitates a bottom-up approach to reading while extensive reading facilitates a top-down approach, a combination of these methods supplies the students with the necessary tactics for coping with challenging texts.

Additionally, extensive reading also helps students to avoid “gear[ing] up for a new subject with each reading selection” (Leki, 1993, p.14). Using one lengthier novel eliminates classroom time needed to build up background knowledge for a subject that may be unfamiliar to students. Introducing the topics and main ideas in a novel will only need to be done for one text, rather than many short separate texts. This will be less cognitively taxing on the student and will allow them to focus on the one text and its meaning.

Literature and extensive reading have played a role in the ESL/EFL classroom for many years. Michael West, an English teacher in India, conceptualized and produced a version of the graded reader during the 1920's, and in 1969, Harold Palmer coined the term “extensive reading” in a second language setting (Day & Bamford, 1998). In the mid 1980s Krashen's Input Hypothesis and the importance it places on comprehensible input, emphasized literature as a rich resource of the target language (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). With the premise that the more comprehensible input a student is exposed to, the more the learner's second language ability will develop, Krashen began to champion free reading programs such as sustained silent reading and self-selected reading (1988). In a review of research, Krashen concluded that studies resulting in no statistic differences between extensive reading groups and reading skills groups actually support the use of sustained reading. This is because results showed no detrimental effects for the extensive reading group and the students presumably found the sustained reading task more enjoyable

than drills. Krashen (1988) also criticized the few studies which obtained negative results for sustained reading as being carried out on a short-term basis rather than a long-term timeline. This, indeed, is a possible flaw because research indicates that reading abilities develop gradually (Grabe, 1991).

The benefits of extensive reading, however, are numerous; it can help increase vocabulary, reading speed, background knowledge, motivation, structural awareness, and assurance (Grabe, 1991). The extensive reading bootstrap hypothesis describes the genesis of a student's love of books. As students discover that they can read in a second language and that the experience is rewarding and well worth the effort, students will be motivated and enthusiastic about reading (Day & Bamford, 1998). They will then invest their enthusiasm into the next text where they will find more success. Thus, a love for reading in the second language develops, and the learner continues to acquire language skills, motivation, and positive attitudes toward reading. Also, according to Day and Bamford (1998), extensive reading can be seen as practical experience and as having an educational purpose for the students.

### **Second Language Reading Research**

Multiple factors have been proven to influence second language reading comprehension, such as amount of vocabulary, text length, clausal complexity, prior knowledge, L1 reading ability, topic interest, reading anxiety, and more. In 1995, Grabe reviewed the L2 reading research and identified the following insights into ESL reading: 1) native language influences second language reading development, 2) there is a "second language proficiency threshold", meaning the learner's first language reading abilities affect his or her L2 reading abilities, 3) students need to be aware of language usage and genre forms 4) discourse structures and graphic representations are important 5) an extensive vocabulary is necessary 6) metacognitive strategies are important 7) extensive reading is needed in the ESL classroom 8) social contexts influence the development of reading in a second language 9) it is essential to use content-based

instruction 10) integrating both reading and writing in an ESL setting is critical.

From exploring the rich, complex, and multilevel processes of adults reading in a foreign language, researchers have developed cognitive models of reading in order to describe the process and learners' strategies (Carrell, Pharis & Liberto, 1989; Fitzgerald, 1995; Swaffer, 1985). Yet, these models do not fully explain the "whole picture" of the L2 reading process, resulting in the conclusion that further research is still needed to completely understand all of the variables in the process and the learner's needs in the reading classroom.

### **Limitations of Past Solutions to Locating Texts**

Although we can see from research that extensive reading brings benefits and is necessary, choosing literature for the adult language learner is problematic because locating material that is both interesting and linguistically accessible to the adult student is a challenge. To remedy this predicament, teachers have employed several tactics 1) creating their own short stories or other materials 2) using adolescent texts, and 3) using modified texts, such as graded readers. The following discussion explicates why each of these solutions is problematic.

One solution is for the teacher to generate a suitable text. A benefit of writing a story or novel is that it can be specialized for particular classroom topics and levels. "Teacher turned author" is not a new concept in the field. As previously mentioned, Michael West a teacher in India during the 1920's, created a version of graded readers (Day & Bamford, 1998). However, the need to write materials for extensive reading adds a burden onto teachers who already face time-consuming duties and an intensive workload. Additionally, a teacher's talent may not extend into creative writing, and previous attempts to do so may have caused criticism against the texts as being "stilted, unnatural, unreal, bland, and a pedagogical dead end" (Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 52). Ultimately, many teachers do not feel they have the time or the talent to produce original reading materials for their students.

The second solution, using adolescent literature, may also fall short of the learner's needs. Many instructors use adolescent literature with adult students to provide what is intuited as a linguistically appropriate level for a text, which is supported by evidence that it may provide a more appropriate lexicon for the adult language learner. Lexical density is an important factor to consider because there is a tendency for instructors and linguists to simplify the lexis of texts (Young, 1991) and because vocabulary has a significant impact on reading comprehension (Grabe, 1991; Grabe, 1995; Nation & Ming-Tzu, 1999). Unfortunately for beginners and intermediate students, a limited vocabulary places the reader in the beginner's paradox, a term coined by Coady in 1996 to describe the problem of a learner acquiring vocabulary through extensive reading when the learner does not know enough words for fluent reading (Dycus, 1997). Bamford and Day (1997) see the situation as a "Catch-22"; students "cannot understand enough of the foreign language to make sense of most written material, and yet they must read the foreign language in order to develop reading fluency" (p. 3). This poses the question of what vocabulary abilities are necessary for extensive reading.

Laufer's research suggests that the second language reader should know 95% of the words in a text for fluent reading and contextual guessing (Nation & Ming-tzu, 1999; Nation & Waring, 1997). This allows the student to read at a more rapid pace and to allocate appropriate cognitive strategies toward other text aspects, such as schema building. In research conducted by Hirsch and Nation (1992), it was estimated that a vocabulary of 2,000 English words will cover 90% of the text in adolescent literature, just under the suggested percentage for fluent reading. Therefore, unmodified adolescent literature may have a more appropriate lexical density for the adult learner.

Yet, the subject matter of adolescent literature does not always address adult interests. Several reading lists have been produced for mature ESL readers, and these lists often recommend young-adult literature. The University of Southern California Language Academy's reading list, for example, contains renowned young adult authors, such as Judy

Blume, Paul Zindel, S.E. Hinton, and Robert Cormier (O'Connor & Woolsey, 1998). These authors are exemplary; however, their primary audience is younger than the adult language learner. Although adolescent books may contain simpler language than their adult counterparts, the subject matter is still designed to attract and keep the interest of an adolescent.

This differs from first language reading in that the literature increases in difficulty to match the audience's cognitive level. Children begin reading picture books with fewer words, then move up to picture books with more text. In many cases, first language readers move from children's literature, to adolescent literature, and eventually on to adult fiction or non-fiction. Additionally, books incorporate appropriate topics for the reader. For example, picture books may include items that a young child would be learning, such as numbers, the alphabet, or names of animals and shapes. Often in adolescent literature the protagonist is young and may be facing such dilemmas as fighting with parents, peer pressure problems, high school situations, or experiencing a first love. Adult literature may focus on family relationships, historical events, or marital issues. Therefore, well-chosen material meets the first language reader's cognitive and affective needs.

This is not the case for second language adult learners. An adult ESL student may lose interest in an adolescent novel because, although it possibly comes closer to meeting the student's linguistic needs, it lacks a topic of interest or relevance to his or her life. In order to teach the whole person and to spark a student's enthusiasm, it is necessary to correctly match the material to the audience. A student's identification with literature may be the impetus for a student's desire to continue to read, thereby attaining one of the goals of extensive reading (Day & Bamford, 1998). Unfortunately, adolescent literature has the possibility of not meeting the student's affective needs, and there is still the question of whether it meets the student's cognitive needs with actual linguistic simplicity beyond the lexicon.

The third solution, the use of modified texts, such as graded readers, is

also problematic because, according to research, differing methods of modification have resulted in aiding reading comprehension or impeding it. Therefore, research examining the pedagogical practice of modifying texts has contradictory findings. Modification can be done both linguistically and contextually (Young, 1999). For example, linguistic adjustments include shortening sentences, omitting or restating idiomatic expressions, avoiding or replacing low frequency vocabulary with higher frequency vocabulary, shortening the text length, restructuring the syntactic complexity of sentences, enhancing the text to call attention to certain grammatical structures, and glossing words. Contextual modifications are adapting an original literary piece by deleting side plots, clarifying, elaborating, and explaining.

Modification of literature is done in order to manipulate the text to enhance reading comprehension. Richards believes that “the readability of a text depends on the ease with which the reader can identify and integrate its underlying propositions. If the reader’s short-term memory, a cognitive variable, is overloaded with information that can be related to two or more possible interpretations, the reader may have to stop and read again” (p. 103). If students are forced to read the same material multiple times, this decreases motivation and is disadvantageous for second language learning as it may cause frustration from ambiguous interpretations of the text’s meaning. Although modification of original material, such as simplification, may provide the necessary linguistic adjustments for language learners, it could also limit comprehension in other areas, such as redundancy (Ross, Long & Yano, 1991; Young 1999) and can obscure cohesiveness and localized information (McKay, 1982). Therefore, it is important to understand the limitations of modified and unmodified texts in the language classroom.

The use of graded readers in the language classroom is a long-standing tradition. However, language teachers have appropriately criticized some simplified versions. In one instance, *Moby Dick* was abridged into sixty pages for ESL students, leaving instructors to wonder about what remaining qualities the text had to offer (Valdes, 1986). Similarly, Day and

Bamford admit "criticism of simplified materials is justified, for they can be poorly written, uninteresting, and hard to read, and can lack normal text features such as redundancy and cohesion" (1998, p.57). Thus, because modification can help or hinder, it is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of graded readers.

In 1987, Parker and Chaudron examined research that used simplification and/or elaborations (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Of the four reading studies, three found statistic significance in favor of simplification, changing the text to simplify linguistic features, and elaboration, expanding on difficult concepts in the text, to aid in reading comprehension. Yet, research has also produced some findings contrary to the use of modified texts. Although there is support for certain types of modifications, there are also instances of no statistical differences for modifications, such as Blau (1982) and Shook (1977), as cited in Ross, Long and Yano (1991). Some of these contradictions can be explained by the role of tasks (recall, cloze, multiple choice, etc.) used in the studies, where one task's findings support simplification while a second task's results do not.

As mentioned earlier, syntactic simplification does not always lead to better reading comprehension (Ross, Long & Yano, 1991; Young, 1999). Yet, syntactic structure is a common element that is manipulated when adapting texts (Lucas, 1991). In a study that supports modifying syntactic structure, researchers examining the effect of prior knowledge, syntactic complexity, and topic on inference generation modified texts to include multiple levels of embedded clauses (Barry & Lazarte, 1998). The students, divided into groups of higher-knowledge readers and lower knowledge readers, then performed a recall task, which was evaluated for within text inference, elaborations, and incorrect inferences. The researchers found that each group of students increased the production of within text inferences with the higher knowledge group showing the largest growth rates. Although a major aim of this study was to help describe the relationship of the variables on second language reading, it does show that syntactic complexity forces readers to infer, and inference sometimes results in miscomprehension.



In addition, Leow (1997) showed text length to be a significant variable in reading comprehension by comparing unmodified and enhanced texts. The enhanced texts were modified to call attention to grammatical structures and to adjust text length on intake of those grammatical structures. Leow concluded "text length plays an important role in facilitating second semester college-level students' comprehension of authentic written text" (p. 166).

In another study, Young (1999) looked at the intuitive simplifications made by both teachers and linguists. The majority of the modifications were lexical and there was no statistical significance between the two groups. The second part of the study was conducted with 127 second-year Spanish foreign language students, who read three texts: one modified by the instructors, one modified by a linguist, and one unmodified passage. After reading, the students participated in a multiple-choice test and a recall task that was scored for main idea units. The researcher conceded that "a relationship between the number of modifications and recall scores is not clearly established in this research" (Young, 1999, p. 359). However, the passage with the least amount of manipulations had the highest recall scores and the two texts with the highest amount of manipulations scored lower than the unmodified version. Ultimately, Young (1999) concludes that, as Leow proposed in 1993, simplification's influence in reading comprehension is difficult to determine if the modifications are done arbitrarily.

To further explore the role of text modification, Ross, Long, and Yano (1991) conducted research comparing the readability of three different text types: simplified, elaborated, and unmodified. An elaborated version expounds on ideas in the text, which may be difficult for a language learner to understand, and may increase text length with the added explanations. Although the use of elaborated texts increased the student's performance on a reading comprehension test of 30 questions, it was a modest increase compared to the groups with the unmodified and simplified texts.

This finding is particularly relevant for the English teacher in that it presents the question of whether it is more effective to spend time on cre-

ating a modified text, which may help minimally in reading comprehension, or to spend time on motivating the students in exploring unmodified materials. From this study, it seems the time may be better spent building the students' background knowledge and schema for unmodified texts. The study also demonstrates the need for text publishers to be thoroughly grounded in second language acquisition (SLA) research about adapting materials.

In conclusion, reading in a second language is a complex process, which we do not fully understand, and which requires more research. However, results show that there are a number of factors that influence the process, including first language reading ability, prior knowledge of the subject matter, lexicon, and semantics. Although research has been mixed in regards to using modified materials, it does show that certain modifications do not lead to a higher readability. Therefore, English teachers need to take this information into consideration as well as an adult's affective needs when choosing between a graded reader, young adult fiction, or an unmodified text. Additionally, teachers need to focus on instructing the student, particularly in vocabulary and background knowledge when using an unmodified text in order for the students to avoid the bookstrap hypothesis and for them to maintain motivation towards reading.

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