

## AUTHOR'S CORNER

In Volume 1 (2) of *Reading in a Foreign Language*, we commented that authors of published reading materials seldom get the chance to present, in a reasonably objective way, the aims of their materials, and the underlying philosophy and design criteria on which they are based. We added that in our opinion this is a serious omission, since (for example) such materials are sometimes blamed by reviewers and users for failing to accomplish aims for which they were never intended. We therefore decided to include in this journal occasional papers in which authors and series editors are given the opportunity to explain their aims and procedures in some detail. This is the second such *Author's Corner* paper, in which David Jolly responds to our questions about his authentic self-access reading resources pack for students of English, entitled *Reading Choices* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

### Reading Choices: Principles and Practices in Self-Access Reading

David Jolly

**EDITORS:** Would you firstly outline the physical contents and arrangement of *Reading Choices*.

DJ: CUP designed a very bright, rather attractive red box and this is the pack referred to above. The thick card box is hinged at the top allowing access to 125 authentic reading texts, each of which is placed on one side of a laminated A4-size round-cornered card. On the back of each card there are contextualising notes, and lexical and comprehension aids and exercises for the student. The 125 cards have been divided into 5 distinct *series* of 25 cards each; those texts in the first series are on the whole shorter, more graphically supported, and less linguistically dense than those in the second series, and so on. There is a continuum based on these criteria through to series five. However, it cannot be said that the textual messages are any less sophisticated or simpler in series one than in the series above them; for example, series one contains a Posy Simmonds cartoon, a Feiffer cartoon, and a clever Health Council poster; series five includes the TV programme for a single day, a newspaper report of a criminal escape, and an advertisement for the National Trust.

Each series is preceded by an index card of A4 size on which the number, topic and title of each text appears. The entire list of texts in all five series is placed at the front of the box on another card. Included in the pack are three copies of the *Answer Book* and a copy of the *Teacher's Book*.

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**EDITORS:** In the *Teacher's Book*, you state that the 125 texts have been divided into five "approximate divisions of difficulty". What are your feelings about grading, then?

DJ: It may seem to some people that we were somewhat coy in calling the five sections "series" rather than levels, especially since we claim to have made the division using the criterion of "difficulty". I think I did this, however, to escape the rigid idea of grading that bases itself, like series of simplified readers, on lexical counts and a structural inventory and leads people 'forward' by levels of linguistic complexity rather than by more natural, straightforward interest and experience. I think this has worked, for whenever I've used the materials students do tend to jump from series three to series two and back to three and four again even though they appreciate that they might find texts in series four more taxing than in series two. Sharp grading on a global scale does not seem a very realistic idea anyway, particularly when using authentic texts, for no more powerful reason than that the students bring their own baggage to a text: language, culture, specialist knowledge and experience. They also bring varying degrees of motivation. Furthermore, an understanding of and familiarity with text types, textual functions and conventions governing and associated with texts is of importance. A Japanese or Thai student is more likely to be baffled by a sophisticated Heineken advertisement than his counterpart from Germany or Austria. Perhaps the most powerful factor of all is the ability to read in the mother tongue, now transferred to the L2. The best guide to the difficulty of a particular text is the student, and can be explained by factors that transcend mere linguistic description.

**EDITORS:** *Reading Choices*, then, appears to be a reaction against certain dissatisfactions that you seem to have with the teaching of reading via textbook materials. Do you have such dissatisfactions?

DJ: I am basically a deschooler, someone who believes that what is disastrous about education almost everywhere is the extent to which initiative is removed from individuals within the context of the national, local and yearly, daily and hourly programme of studies decided on by both administrators and educationalists, as well as classroom teachers. It seemed to me that my own and others' use of the lockstep reading lesson was professionally indefensible as a method of promoting reading confidence and competence in learners; I felt supported by the fact that primary education in Britain has for long believed the same, even if its interpretation is not often one I would support. My interest in self-access came, then, from very direct experience. In the school classrooms abroad I reacted against the monolithic reading text lesson popular as a technique at the secondary level. In a typical lesson, the reading text was chosen for content or topicality but often from an improving source (such as *The Listener* or *The Guardian*). The class read, or studied or worked at the texts in the same way and regardless of the intentions of the author, at the same time and at the same speed. Whatever was gained by such practice was achieved at the expense of the students' normal reading habits, and encouraged myopia, an excessive concern with linguistic detail, and a failure to consult real interest or observe natural behaviour when reading a foreign language. In contrast to this, *best* practice at the lower end of the primary school revealed self-access of quite an elegant sort; children allowed to read when they wanted to, as quickly or as slowly as was comfortable, and sometimes even *where* they wanted to!; choice, within the range of what could be read; children allowed to bring in things from home (with the moralistic exception of comics!) or to

read and reread things apparently below their so-called "level" and to attempt things sometimes above this level if so directed by interest and enthusiasm. Below this high standard, more hesitant teachers ossified these practices of self-access by labelling the children themselves as *scheme* readers or *free* readers, but in the best classrooms all children were *free* readers. Since I believe that the quantum leaps in education of the individual are only made when the individual assumes some or all of the responsibility for his own learning, I naturally felt that the teacher should be removed from his pivotal and manipulative position in the reading class to allow the students to get on and read what they wanted to at a comfortable speed, alone or in groups. It wasn't that I thought it was necessary for the teacher to disappear from the reading classroom (or indeed, the writer or compiler of materials); rather that the teacher should become an aide, a resource and an organiser of *materials*, rather than people.

As your question suggests I also, at that time but not now, objected to the *materials* in textbooks. I have on my shelves a dozen textbooks for reading, the latest published at the same time as *Reading Choices*, in which all the texts chosen are of the same approximate length, in roughly the same style, and are accompanied by a set routine for comprehension. I mean, *why* were there always 10 or 15 comprehension questions? The Cambridge examinations and the old RSA examinations also had a disastrous effect upon materials and a proper view of reading skills: in the examinations, it seemed, all text whether written or spoken, was of uniform length and to be tested by uniform methods. I am pleased to say that there are now a lot of materials available which can in no way be criticised on these grounds (even if the majority of these seem to come from one publisher!). I think what was missing was as solemn an ingredient as integrity. Books like Catherine Walters' *Authentic Reading* and the *Heinemann Reading Comprehension Course* by Davies and Whitney have done a lot to redress the balance.

**EDITORS:** A major aim, then, of *Reading Choices* is to free the reading lesson from the constraints of teacher-directed, teacher-selected activity that is commonly the consequence of using a published textbook. But (apart from the fact that your texts and associated activities are presented on cards and are therefore not bound) how does *Reading Choices* encourage learner-direction/selection?

DJ: On its own, it cannot! I have heard of a teacher using *Reading Choices* by directing students to work at a particular text for 30 minutes, before "ascending" to the next number in the series. However, the very fact that the texts are on single cards means that the teacher cannot conduct a lockstep lesson. The fact that students are initially supplied with copies of the index cards (teachers have the publishers' permission to xerox these) and that copies of the answer book are available with the set does allow and, by implication, encourage the individual student to follow his own reading path from text selection to text use, to text exit. Even so, I do not believe that students educated in traditional ways necessarily find it easy to respond to the sudden offer of limited individualisation that these self-access materials imply. To paraphrase John Holt, the lion is bewildered when the hoops are taken away. The teacher using self-access materials like *Reading Choices* for the first time may well have to spend some time reorientating his students away from school "drip-feed" methodology to the more natural initiative-based learning required in the real world. A red box with 125 cards in it cannot do that on its own.

Figure 1: Index Card for Series 3

	<i>TOPIC</i>	<i>TITLE</i>
3.1	<i>Marriage</i>	'Mother's ruin': after the divorce
3.2	<i>Religion</i>	Love your enemies
3.3	<i>Work</i>	The who, what, and where of vacation jobs
3.4	<i>Money</i>	We have five different ways to help you
3.5	<i>Transport (road safety)</i>	What your child must know
3.6	<i>Holidays</i>	Map guide to New Zealand
3.7	<i>Family life</i>	Some harsh facts of British family life
3.8	<i>Social issues</i>	The gipsy with a heart of gold
3.9	<i>Medicine</i>	Vaccination tragedy
3.10	<i>Science</i>	New weapons
3.11	<i>Money</i>	South West Water Authority: 'Where the money goes'
3.12	<i>Police and the law</i>	A song: 'Estevan'
3.13	<i>Crime</i>	Inside story
3.14	<i>Literature</i>	Where Shakespeare found his stories
3.15	<i>The Royal Family</i>	A name for Princess Anne's baby
3.16	<i>Art (painting)</i>	Samuel Palmer: British painter
3.17	<i>The supernatural</i>	Lincoln's sad ghost haunts White House
3.18	<i>Mental illness</i>	One man in nine becomes mentally ill
3.19	<i>Art (painting)</i>	Four British landscape painters
3.20	<i>Life style</i>	How the British housewife lives
3.21	<i>Television</i>	Television 'may aggravate marital stress'
3.22	<i>Moral issues</i>	We no longer have any respect for the dead
3.23	<i>Politics</i>	Where are they now: Jim Callaghan
3.24	<i>Technology</i>	Britain changing to nuclear power
3.25	<i>Sport</i>	Football: England's man of magic

**EDITORS:** Would you like to expand on this? In the Teacher's Book, you mention that the teacher "needs to adopt a somewhat different role from the traditional one. His or her function is to act as a genuine adviser and informant when and where required, rather than as the controller and presenter of reading texts." Self-access reading resources of this nature require a very radical change from the teacher's traditional 'centre-stage' role. Many teachers are understandably nervous at the prospect of adopting such a change, eg. the fear of losing control, the danger of excessive noise, the problems of weak readers. Can you offer further advice and encouragement to such teachers, on how they might make the transition with confidence?

DJ: The effect of being at the centre of the stage as a teacher is that you are seen to have, and feel yourself to have, control and power over others. Unless teachers *share* power in the classroom, then that power is arbitrary and, for the students, education is a "mystery". For teachers who do not want to, or cannot, demystify education — because to lose that sort of control would be intolerable — I have no words of comfort or advice. One can only address oneself to those who do *not* depend upon the official authority invested in them as teachers. So the first and I think the most powerful piece of advice I would give is to share with one's students the premises of individualisation and the relation of that to self-access. There are very effective ways of showing students experiences in their own lives of successful self-initiated and self-sustained learning. (Are people *trained* to learn to walk? Did Pele achieve his soccer skills by a series of 40-minute doses of daily instruction or ...?). This sort of sharing may take quite a long time for some students; students become too teacher-dependent and fixated. Secondly, ensure that in a practical sense *you* are very well organised and that in self-access classes (as in other places where self-access is the mode, like gymnasiums, public parks, libraries) there are clear ground rules such as proper turn-taking at the box, efficient self-monitoring and record taking, fair access to ancillary aids and resources. Thirdly, be prepared to follow student needs; this means that you should not worry about your occasional idleness if at any particular moment no student has a particular need; there will be other times when you have to work considerably harder than when in the teacher-dominant mode. Fourthly, and as encouragement, there is considerable pleasure to be derived from serving the genuine needs of individuals as revealed in a self-access class. The weak reader, for example, is likely to gain far more appropriate help and be reading in a far less threatening environment in the self-access class than in the public arena of a teacher-centred class.

**EDITORS:** Do you feel that you have dealt adequately with the problem of indexing in *Reading Choices*? In self-access classrooms it is, after all, essential that students can get at what they want and understand what is available.

DJ: This is one of my hobby-horses and that's probably because I've never felt entirely happy about whether my students fully understand what is available to them. In a teacher-controlled environment this doesn't matter; metalanguage may well be part of the mystification process. In a self-access classroom, the metalanguage may confuse. While teachers have every reason to possess an adequate descriptive language for reading skills, reading strategies and text types, learners have no such reasons. In real life it is clear that people will choose what to read, or even *whether* they read, by a number of different criteria:

- the topic (“Have you got a book on soft-fruit cultivation?”)
- the text-type (“Give my kid a comic and he’ll read it - doesn’t matter what it is”)
- the content (“This sounds interesting - ‘Bishop attacks elderly American’ - wonder what it’s about”)
- the appearance related to content (“It was a short article and I saw the name of Ghandi in it, so I read it”)
- length
- seriousness
- function

and so on. Indexes arranged on all these lines would be my ideal. In *Reading Choices* we have stuck with three of the criteria: topic, contents (as indicated by title) and appearance. In classroom practice I have found that students choose what to read by reference to topic and content; many prefer to combine that with seeing the text; some ask for text-type, but not many. This suggests that in using self-access materials, students should have indexes, but should also be allowed to browse through texts, which is more akin to natural behaviour. For the user of the box this presents a bit of a problem, for of course in a large class it is not possible to allow everyone to look through a single pack of materials!

**EDITORS:** Different authors have different interpretations of the term *reading*. How would *you* define reading; and how — apart from the points you have already mentioned — does *Reading Choices* seek to encourage the learner to acquire successful reading skills?

DJ: I’m going to give you a very unsophisticated reply here. It is certainly true that ability to read relies upon what we call reading strategies and I have every faith that students can be aided in developing reading strategies. But my purpose in *Reading Choices* was not to develop such skills discretely; it was to allow the student to do his own reading and to develop, or more realistically, transfer natural L1 reading skills to the foreign language. *Reading Choices* thus addresses itself to the problems of opportunity to read naturally and authentically in a foreign language, rather than to the development of particular reading skills. In short, I believe learners are likely to acquire successful reading skills if they are given the freedom (or time, speed, choice, task etc) to read.

**EDITORS:** Nevertheless, we sense a contradiction here over the phrase “natural reading” and “freedom to read”. In the Teacher’s Book, you stress that, “Any text is unique ... in the sense that the reader will make his or her own reconstruction of the meanings contained in it in the light of previous experience or previous knowledge.” In practical terms, how is this possible? In other words, you as an author must of necessity put certain questions and activities for the reader to complete: in doing so, surely you are to a considerable degree imposing you *own* reconstruction of the text’s message, in the light of *your* previous knowledge and experience.

DJ: Yes, in fact I have a certain ambivalence towards the comprehension activities. When I talk about natural reading and freedom to read, I'm talking about the simple reading of the text — this of course begs the question of my authorial selection of texts and of the texts themselves being read out of time and place contexts — nevertheless, in my own classes I say to students that they are free simply to *read*; I suggest that the associated work on the back of each text is optional. However, I think exaggerated claims have been made for the extent of uniqueness of any one reading by an individual. (In the same way, I cannot accept a very romantic view of musical or literary experience as being 'unique'.) The informed, experienced members of a culture will share a very large number of perceptions and reactions to the same stimulus, and in a semantico-cultural context the extent of agreement on interpretation is likely to be very great indeed. Thus, while naturally I do not wish to impose purely personal interpretations upon a non-native reader, I do not shrink from articulating for and guiding the student via certain comprehension questions, towards meanings that a consensus of native speakers would agree were clearly contained in a given text. I do not share the currently fashionable romantic view of the individual and his world, though I defend to the end his or her right to be an individual. What I have to guard against as an author is that my own reconstruction of the textual message and my own previous knowledge and experience is generally that of the tribe's. Items such as Text 3.1, question 3 are illustrations of this correspondence

Figure 2: Text 3.1



(Question 3)

Which of the words in brackets is correct?

The woman is (happy/unhappy) because her ex-husband, Bill, is very (selfish/reasonable) now. This makes her feel (sad/happy/angry) because it was (he/she) who made the marriage break up!

**EDITORS: Most of your comprehension item types are of a discrete nature. In the light of current emphasis on 'top-down' models of reading, and given recent research on schema theory, do you not feel that the reader should also be encouraged to identify text structure?**

DJ: I guess this is just one of those things that one wishes one had been more sure and clear about when producing the materials. I finished *Reading Choices* at the end of 1979; by the time I got to 1982 I realised that the whole thing would have been better if I had worked entirely on task orientations on the one hand, and global views of text on the other. It is interesting that in order to work on the comprehension items I spent a considerable time with each text drawing models of the semantics, so that I wouldn't be misled by arbitrary items; only for a few of the texts did I get as far as reproducing the models as comprehension items. And it is interesting, you know, that my experience of students working with the materials is that when they tackle a personal task, their response to and understanding of the text is far fuller and more appropriate than when dealing with absolutely discrete items. I think this is because these items are more clearly analogous to the uses we make of text in real life, eg.

2. Which of these actions are *legal* and which are *illegal*?
  - (a) My neighbour is away so I've picked some apples off his tree and made an apple pie — they were hanging over my garden.
  - (b) My new neighbour, Mr X, has just walked over my front garden.
  - (c) Mrs Y, my other neighbour, has lent me her hair-dryer, and I've just shampooed the front-room carpet and dried it with the hair-dryer.
  - (d) The boy next door keeps throwing paper aeroplanes over the wall and into my garden.
  - (e) I always tear the aeroplanes up and put them in the dustbin.
  - (f) I want to stop Mr X cutting down his beautiful 200 year old yew tree. Can I do this?
  
4. Do any of these laws seem unfair to you?  
Which ones, and why?



Figure 3: Text 4.4

# 10 things worth knowing about your neighbour

- 1** So she's been taking a short cut across your front garden for years? Could be she's actually got a legal right of way over it! Generally, if you've allowed her to walk across your land unchallenged for 20 years the law says she can carry on.
- 2** Thinking of asking her to look after your valuable gold bracelet while you're on holiday? If someone broke in to her house and stole it you'd have no redress. For unless she left all the doors and windows open she can't be regarded as legally negligent and therefore you've no case against her. And probably your insurance company wouldn't pay if you lent it out like this.
- 3** If you lend her your ancient lawn mower, and she injures herself because of a fault, she can sue you for damages—even if you didn't think that there was much wrong with the machine.
- 4** If, when you invite her over for coffee, the deck-chair you give her collapses, she's got a case against you.
- 5** So you want to cut down a tree in *your* garden? She could stop you—by getting the council to put a tree preservation order on it.
- 6** If her plumbing is playing up and the fault is found in the mains that pass through *your* garden, you may have to pay up—even if everything is okay in your home.
- 7** Even if it's the eighth time her little boy has hit his cricket ball over the fence, you have a legal obligation to give it back—and in the condition you found it.
- 8** When she came round for tea she left her umbrella behind. Strictly speaking, if you use it without her permission some lawyers could argue that you were guilty of stealing the umbrella!
- 9** Those lovely plums on the branches hanging over into your garden are still hers. Though you can cut back the branches you can't keep the fruit.
- 10** She said you could borrow her special scissors to cut out your new dress. If you then use them to cut the dog's hair you could land in trouble! If you borrow something you are supposed to use it for what's been agreed.

I think this all goes to show that one has to be very careful when discussing the authentic and talking about the natural. And in one sense there is no way I can avoid criticism in this area. Although all the materials are authentic in the sense that they were written by and for real life use, rather than for learning purposes, the use to which the students put them, and the situations in which they read them, and the activities which I as author suggest they do are either less authentic or entirely unauthentic. An article has been taken *out* of SHE magazine and is being read at a different time and in

a different place; the original writer probably made certain assumptions about his likely reader that may not be true for this particular overseas reader. In other words, my authentic texts are not, in all senses of the word, authentic — they are not authentically-contextualised. I do not see a ready *publishing* answer to this; it was partially to meet this criticism that the little boxes of explanation were placed on the back of each card, e.g.

This set of dance instructions comes from the *Radio Times*, a magazine giving information about television and radio programmes each week. Peggy presented these dances on television.

Figure 4: Front of Card 2.9 (Text)

## PEGGY'S DISCO DANCE ACTIONS

**How to begin:** Dancers stand in circles or lines with weight on right foot, feet slightly apart. The timing of movements is shown in bold numbers

### HITCH-HIKE

**1, 2:** Step to side with left foot, tap right foot to left. At same time use 'hitch-hike' thumb over right shoulder







**3, 4:** Step to side with right foot, tap left foot to right. At same time use 'hitch-hike' thumb over left shoulder



**5, 6:** Repeat above action to the left

**7, 8:** Repeat above action to the right









### STEP, TAP AND CLAP

**1, 2:** Step to side with left foot, tap right foot to left. At same time clap hands

**3, 4:** Step to side with right foot, tap left foot to right. At same time clap hands

**5, 6:** Repeat above action to the left

**7, 8:** Repeat above action to the right

### ROLY-POLY

**1, 2:** Step to side with left foot, tap right foot to left. At same time use 'roly-poly' arm action

**3, 4:** Step to side with right foot, tap left foot to right. At same time use 'roly-poly' arm action

**5, 6:** Repeat above action to the left

**7, 8:** Repeat above action to the right

Bob Saunders

The same caveats apply to comprehension activities. I think it is fair to say that because reading texts are inevitably unauthentically contextualised, it becomes that much more difficult, though not impossible, to produce authentic comprehension work. In addition, when producing the work for *Reading Choices* I was forced to make a number of changes by publishing constraints: some very open-ended tasks were closed down because it was feared that there would be too much writing on the cards; for the same reason, some non-linguistic responses were forced into linguistic frames and a number of tables, charts, visual analogues were transformed into verbal questions.

**EDITORS:** Vocabulary has been somewhat neglected in recent years as a component of learning to read a foreign language. Your approach to vocabulary, in *Reading Choices*, is largely the provision of glosses, or *checking* directions, eg. "Check the meaning of X"/"Use a dictionary to find the meaning of X". What are your views on helping the reader to acquire *independent* vocabulary puzzling-out strategies, eg. context-guessing, synonym search, word analysis?

DJ: Well, I've got two answers to that. The first is implicit in a previous answer, which is that I believe that if the student is left to read in freedom, he has more chance of acquiring the ability to cope with unfamiliar lexis than if his attention is constantly and systematically directed to all new items. Secondly, it is not true that *Reading Choices* uses mainly glossing techniques to deal with vocabulary. A large number of other techniques are used in the sections called WORDS, or descriptively titled: synonym or antonym search, picture matching, definition matching, listing and itemising, recontextualisation, phrase and sentence completion, and so on. Perhaps what has led you to overlook such items is the very presence of such open and demystifying suggestions about glossing as you have already enumerated in the question - in fact a number of students have come to me to check how they answer the 'question' "Check the meaning of 'ecumenical' in an English dictionary." What I tended to do was to use discovery strategies where they would clearly work, and glossing techniques where there were pivotal words in the text not accessible to puzzling-out techniques.

**EDITORS:** Each card in the resource collection consists of the text on one side, and reading activities on the other side. Personally, we find this need to constantly turn the card backwards and forwards somewhat annoying! Do you have any comments?

DJ: We had to make a decision which inevitably compromised, and we chose the back-to-back solution for the following reasons. Text and reading activities placed on different cards would have been massively expensive and organisationally-cumbersome. Text and activities on the same side would have distorted the text in two ways: the texts would have had to be greatly reduced in size or to have lost their authentic form. Secondly, I did not want the apparatus of learning activities to intrude upon the genuine view of the text - and for the students who have used the materials, the absence of the apparatus has considerably increased their attraction.

**EDITORS:** Finally, you have earlier stressed your dissatisfaction with a finite set of reading materials. Do you have any plans to expand *Reading Choices* (perhaps on a second edition)? If so, what thoughts do you have concerning the further development of your self-access philosophy?

DJ: I've always had plans for *teachers* to expand *Reading Choices*! No, when the publishers and I first discussed the box, we did float the idea of publishing new additional packs of cards, 25 at a time, every couple of years. However, the cost of this and the organisational difficulties of placing them in the present box without providing a supplementary box has prevented us from doing anything so far. Secondly, and I think far more relevantly since my agreement to publish in the first place was motivated by a desire to offer a practical *model* rather than a definite set of materials, I feel that any extension to the scheme, including the entire replacing of the materials, should be the responsibility of the individual institutions or the teachers. I would like to think that in five years' time the institutions and schools that have bought *Reading Choices* would have discarded what they don't want and augmented the box with new materials, preferably student prompted. 125 texts is a derisory number; in my own institution I'm aiming for a minimum of 3,000.