

Some Approaches to the Design of Reading Courses in English as a Foreign Language

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This paper considers the design of courses which have the common aim of improving the reading of students who are studying English for educational or academic reasons. It is proposed that reading activities reflect the specific approaches of the course designers and that these approaches can be classified as either *psychological*, *linguistic*, *content-orientated* or *pedagogically-orientated*. The characteristics of each of these approaches is presented and illustrated with exercises from published courses. Some of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach are discussed.

AIMS OF READING COURSES

Somerset Maugham, who began learning Russian as an adult, confessed in his autobiography that he "never got further than being able to read the plays of Chekov". Reading, to Maugham, was one of the least difficult aspects of learning a foreign language; he held that it was pleasant to read foreign literature but that "such knowledge as this can be acquired easily".

Few English speakers can share Maugham's experience of the accessibility of reading in other languages, and judging from the popularity of reading courses, many foreign learners of English also feel less than confident about reading English. Such learners are not primarily concerned with the pleasures of reading literature, however; a common requirement of a reading course is that it prepares the student to read a variety of non-fiction texts for the purpose of gaining information.

Such a requirement is acknowledged by the authors of a number of recently published reading courses, as the following selection of aims and objectives testifies:

"To help students recognize, understand and enjoy a wide variety of text types in English." (*Reasons for Reading*, 1979)

"To assist the non-native speaker of English studying in the medium of English ... to comprehend more fully material of the kind he may be required to read." (*Reading Comprehension Course : Selected Strategies*, 1982)

"This course is designed to guide students to the acquisition of strategies of reading in English which they can put to use in following their specialist studies. ... A selection is made of topics of general interest and relevance to learners at this level." (*Reading and Thinking in English 1979/80*)

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Of course, not all teaching of reading depends on published reading courses, but many teachers of reading have similar aims in mind when they make collections of texts as a basis for reading practice; and authors of general courses - whose wider aims include writing and study skills - often include reading sections which work towards these same objectives. In the last category, I would include *Panorama* (Williams 1982) which includes in its set of purposes that it should provide students with the necessary skills for reading a textbook, and states that the content has been chosen to be of interest to students "from a broad spectrum of academic interests".

To summarize these introductory remarks, then, it seems that many reading courses are designed to develop the reading skills of students who wish to use English for educational purposes in unspecified - or only broadly specified - fields.

Yet despite these common aims, courses differ greatly from each other, and individual teachers who set out to plan a reading programme may find themselves with a fresh set of decisions to make in order to select (or prepare) work suitable for any particular group of students.

In order to make principled decisions about the choice of reading texts and related activities, a teacher or course designer often draws on a mixture of common sense and theory. The theory comes from positions taken by "experts", sometimes based on research. Most published courses claim to be based on well-founded principles and to incorporate the findings of recent research. Phrases like "new approach", "functional contexts", "reading strategies", "reading processes" are scattered on book covers; but as Alderson and Urquhart (1984: xxvii) say "...the literature on reading abounds with speculations, opinions and claims", and it is often difficult to sort out the reasons for particular activities let alone establish their validity.

In an attempt to establish a model for the design of reading courses, I have isolated four approaches which have been taken by course writers and which have been defended in the literature. I have called these approaches:

- psychological
- linguistic
- content-orientated
- pedagogically-orientated

Individual published courses vary in the strength of their adherence to any one particular approach, and most courses claim to incorporate more than one of the philosophies that underlie these approaches. It does seem to be the case, however, that in most of the books I have examined the choice of activities in a course relates to the author's stated intention.

1. The Psychological Approach

Courses which take the psychological approach to reading development claim to provide exercises or activities which train natural reading processes. Thus they focus on what takes place in the mind of the individual reader.

There are two distinct levels at which the training is seen to operate: the first is at the level of simple *word recognition* (the graphic-phonetic relationship), while the second is at the level of *interpretation* (the syntactic-semantic-pragmatic relationship with the text).

A published course which claims to provide exercises designed to practise the *processes* involved in the activity of reading is Morrow's *Skills for Reading* (1980). In the introduction, Morrow writes: "The exercises have been developed in a conscious attempt to practise the skills and processes involved in a range of reading activities".

He then goes on to describe the nature of the reading process, which he sees as involving three interdependent elements (after Dakin 1969):

- *recognition* of the visual input
- *structuring* of the input into meaningful stretches
- *interpretation* of the input

In each element the focus is on training psychological processes that take place in the reader's mind: the *reader* is said to "recognize the structures" and "interpret the input" and "structure the input".

It is worth noting, I think, that discussion of reading processes is usually concerned with those mental processes that take place when a proficient reader is engaged in reading. Not all these processes are readily accessible to the observer, the teacher, or even the research psychologist - although in recent years some serious attempts have been made to investigate them. How far a model of reading processes can be transferred directly to provide a model for teaching reading is an open question, but this is precisely what Morrow attempts in *Skills for Reading*. He concedes that "the framework ... is over-simple" but claims that "its value lies in the pedagogical relationship which it fosters between underlying theory and the practicalities of the classroom".

The majority of the exercises in *Skills for Reading* are designed to practise the psychological processes specified by the author rather than drawing the learner's attention to the meaning of the twenty reading texts, which - incidentally - have very interesting content, being texts from *New Scientist* reporting varied research projects.

When Morrow uses the term "input" he does not mean the content of the reading passages. Sometimes he is referring to the graphological form of words, and at other times to meanings. Compare, for example, the following two word recognition exercises (pp. 24 and 64 respectively):

Recognition

1 Word recognition by shape

Some of these are not real English words. Don't worry about their meaning. Find the words with the same spelling as the ones in darker print and underline them.

Timed activity

immediately

immediatly immediatley immediately immediateley

experience

experienced expereince exporience experience

automatic

automatic autematic atomatic automate

extrapolate

extropolate axtrapolate extrapalate extrapolate

excretion

excrition escretion excretion excretion

concentration

concentrateion concentrion comcentration

concentration

arousal

aroused arrousal arousall arousal

repetition

repetition repeatition repettition repetion

transposing

transpossing tranzposing transposing trensposing

distribution

ditribution distribute destruction distribution

Recognition

1 Word recognition by collocation

Groupwork

Here are some words presented in pairs. Which of the words on the right might you find in a sentence which contains the pair of words given? Choose one or more words and be ready to explain your choice.

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| e.g. illness, injury | <u>doctor/holiday/hospital</u> |
| a. new, technology | arranged/developed/ built |
| b. example, problems | undergo/suffer/ face |
| c. specify, precise | ways/means/ terms |
| d. this, reason | principal/major/ big |
| e. probing ahead, practice | frequent/successful/ common |

The first is a graphological recognition activity, presumably designed to increase the ease with which readers recognize the form of words without necessarily any intervention of meaning. The second, labelled "word recognition by collocation", requires the reader to impose a semantic interpretation on each word and to make mental associations between words. *Recognition of the visual input* must, of course, involve the basic requirement of reading, which is the process of relating the printed word (the visual symbol) to its associated meaning or concept; but whether these exercises are useful training at this level is not at all clear. An awareness of letter and word characteristics has been shown to have value for some native-speaker children learning to read (see, for example, Clay 1972) but Morrow offers no justification for practice of this type by second or foreign language readers. It would appear to be unnecessary for those who can already read in another language which uses the Roman Script. In fact, the emphasis on the interpretation of individual words would seem to be superfluous at anything but the most elementary stages of reading. As Goodman 1973:12 has stressed: "Because we have not properly respected language, we have tended to think we facilitated learning to read by breaking written language into bite-sized pieces for learners. Instead, we turned it from easy-to-learn language into hard-to-learn abstractions".

But Morrow is not only concerned with the recognition of words and structures. He concedes the important point that people read in different ways when reading for different purposes, and includes in his exercises more complex activities involving interpretation at the level of sentence and paragraph, where the reader is required to utilize his existing knowledge (and that of his classmates, via discussion and group work) in answering such questions as:

What do you think is the most important idea in each of the two paragraphs?

The learner's inferencing abilities are also encouraged through the interpretation of the structure of texts and the relationship between sets of ideas, and prediction-development questions like:

What do you think the next paragraph might be about?

Activities like these, involving the manipulation of ideas and information, are found in a number of courses, particularly those where reading is related to study skills. In the more advanced books of the *Reading and Thinking in English* series we find work on "Reading as a Process". In *Discourse in Action* (p.8), the authors tell the reader:

Reading as a process (how we read)

Reading is an active process, not a passive process. It involves interpreting passages, not just receiving a message. A reader interprets a passage by:

understanding a writer's implications,
making inferences,
realizing not only what information is given but also what information is not given,
evaluating the passage.

Exercises are included which involve readers in these activities. One such exercise (pp. 8/9) which accompanies two passages on the microcomputer - first an instructional text, second a piece of journalism - is illustrated below.

Putting a passage in its context

The ways in which we interpret passages can be practised by trying to discover the context in which a passage was written. This involves considering such aspects as: the intended reader, the writer, the purpose of the passage, the type of writing. Read the following two extracts and answer these questions about the context of each one.

- 1 Was the passage intended for:
 - a specialists
 - b students
 - c general readers
 - d academics and others with an interest in science
 - e schoolchildren?
- 2 Is the purpose of the extract:
 - a to teach a subject
 - b to interest people in a new subject
 - c to provide new information
 - d to persuade people to adopt a particular point of view
 - e to tell people how to do something?
- 3 Does the extract assume that the reader:
 - a has a scientific background
 - b is familiar with the nature and use of microprocessors
 - c already knows about calculators and robots
 - d has a specialist knowledge of the devices used to store data?

Everyone accepts that the microprocessor will eventually permeate into every kind of equipment and be used by all industries. But even these powerful calculating devices depend on other components. Behind every microprocessor must be a store to hold the results of its calculations and the instructions which control them. The most versatile way of doing this is to hold them in a programmable read-only-memory or PROM. This differs from the random access memory or RAM, by providing long term, instead of short term data storage.

By 1971 semiconductor makers were ready to exploit a very old principle for the memory technology business—the use of miniature fuses which could be selectively blown to change conductor patterns. This is the origin of the modern programmable read-only-memory, or PROM.

Passage A

Passage B

THE ROBOT AGE has begun—thanks to the silicon chip which can do the work of a massive computer bank. Already the cheap brain-power of these quarter-inch

chips—called micro-processors—has put a calculator in almost everyone's pocket and created a £25 million industry for TV games.

IMAGINE your home being run by an electronic Micro Mother.

A push-button brain that organizes the shopping and the cooking, pays the bills, and even remembers your birthday!

And imagine all the household chores being handled by a robot Mrs Mop that washes the floor, cleans the carpet and even mows the lawn!

No, it's not just a futuristic dream—tomorrow's world is already here...

Micro Mum and Mrs Mop are the forerunners of the first generation of computerized home robots created by the silicon chip.

**Just press a button
and Micro Mum will
wake you up, make
the tea, read
the news, pay
the bills and
cook the bacon
just the way
you like it...**

Exercises like this, however, do not attempt to train psychological processes at a subconscious level (like the graphic-phonetic relationship) but, on the other hand, seek to develop the learner's *awareness* of reading processes. The authors write (Introduction : v) : "The book is based on the belief that the student will make more progress if he understands what he is doing and why he is doing it".

We can compare this approach, which involves training the reader to think about ideas and the organisation of ideas, with the activities in the first book of the *Reading and Thinking in English* series, where the exercises are much more language-orientated, the intention being to extend "students' basic knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and how they are used to express fundamental concepts" (*Concepts in Use*, viii), rather than on the readers' processing of the discourse.

2. The Linguistic Approach

While the psychological approach focuses essentially on the reader, the linguistic approach focuses on the words and sentences of the reading passage. The assumption is that if the learners can handle linguistic features of the text efficiently, reading ability will be improved. Certain traditional reading comprehension courses took a similar approach. While no recent course that I know of is exclusively linguistically-orientated, this approach often influences a large proportion of the activities in a reading course.

An example is Sim and Laufer-Dvorkin's *Reading Comprehension Course* (1982). Although it includes comprehension exercises which are concerned with the meaning and organisation of the reading texts, including examples of the "prediction" activity mentioned above, much of the work is language-oriented. As they say in the introduction "each unit emphasises a syntactic or lexical point considered likely to cause reading difficulties." Thus, in Unit 1 for example, we find a grammar section on "Variations in Conditional Clauses" which includes three sentence-completion exercises practising tense and syntax, followed by a vocabulary exercise.

A range of interesting language-related exercises are also included in the earlier books of *Reading and Thinking in English: Concepts in Use* and *Exploring Functions*. In *Concepts in Use* the objective is to teach how grammar and vocabulary are used to express concepts. The authors state:

Concepts in Use has a double approach:

1. It provides practice in understanding the meanings expressed by basic grammar and vocabulary. The range of grammar and vocabulary introduced is carefully controlled.
2. It develops students' abilities to understand how this range of grammar is used to give information in short passages.

The exercises in *Concepts of Use* are not, however, overtly grammatical. Whereas in Sim and Laufer-Dvorkin's *Reading Comprehension Course* the language exercises have such headings as "Model Auxiliary Verbs" and "Contact Relative Clauses", the *Concepts in Use* exercises are presented in the forms of an example (the pattern) and a task, as in the following (p.38).

Patterns 1*The memory unit stores information.***Task 4**

Match the parts of the body and their functions.

PART	FUNCTION
1 the heart	a break down food
2 the skeleton	b carry blood
3 the kidneys	c filter waste products
4 the hair	d pump blood
5 the arteries	e protect the body
6 the teeth	f support the body

Task 5

Complete these statements.

- 1 pumps blood through the body.
- 2 The arteries from the heart through the body.
- 3 break down food in the mouth.
- 4 The skeleton and protects the internal organs.
- 5 protects from heat and cold.
- 6 filter from the blood.

The teacher's notes (p. 85) tell us that "This task practises expressing function by means of the present simple" but the student's attention is directed to meaning.

Language exercises have a similarly important role in the second book in the series, *Exploring Functions*. At this level, they are presented to the student more directly, with such rubrics as:

Part 3**Grammar
and information**

The information in passages is expressed by grammar and vocabulary. The same information can be expressed in different ways.

"Tasks" are now replaced by "activities", and the grammatical or lexical focus is quite clear even though it is always related to the expression of meaning, as in this example from p.11:

Activity 5

This activity practises ways of using different grammatical forms to express the same information. Study this example:



- 1 Antibodies attack harmful bacteria.
- 2 Harmful bacteria are attacked by antibodies.

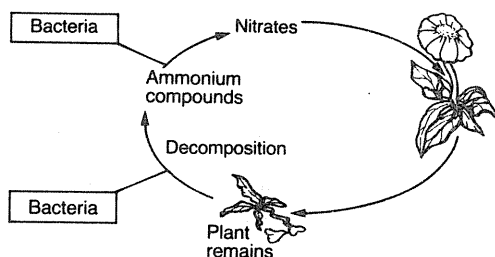
The two sentences contain the same information about the relation between antibodies and harmful bacteria.

Sentence 1 refers to the action of antibodies.

Sentence 2 refers to what happens to harmful bacteria.

Now study the following diagram and complete the sentences about it.

The role of bacteria in the nitrogen cycle



- 1 Plants absorb
- 2 decompose plant remains.
- 3 Decomposition releases
- 4 Bacteria convert into nitrates.

Statements 1–4 refer to the action of plants, bacteria and decomposition. Now complete the following statements to give the same information in a different way.

- 5 are absorbed by plants.
- 6 Plant remains are decomposed by
- 7 are released by
- 8 are converted by into nitrates.

The notion that improving linguistic competence will also help reading development is not a new one, and it accords with a commonsense approach to reading in a foreign language. It seems more than obvious that reading ability in a foreign language depends largely upon the reader's language level. However, many native speakers are not efficient readers, so although knowledge of the language may be necessary for reading, it is not sufficient in itself for *good* reading. It has been claimed that reading ability in the first language is a more significant influence on the second language reading than knowledge of the language. Alderson (1984: 1-27) discusses this issue and summarizes some relevant research. Although, generally, he argues for much more research, he comes to the tentative conclusion that reading skills and knowledge of the target language are both important, but that at lower levels the language ability is the more significant. Another factor which has been shown to influence reading comprehension is the reader's familiarity with the subject matter ("field-familiarity") - and familiarity with the genre (e.g. Mohammed and Swales 1984). It is still generally agreed, however, that the linguistic system of a text can present problems for a reader whose proficiency in English is low.

3. The Content-Orientated Approach

The content-orientated approach is founded on the view that the *purpose* inherent in a particular act of reading is an essential feature - what Farnes (1973) calls "a critical component". Farnes believes that if the reader has a specific purpose for his reading, it would be goal-directed and efficient. Sprache (1963) provides evidence that (with native speaker readers) "ineffectual and superficial reading" could be related to lack of purpose in the mind of the reader. Content-oriented reading exercises sometimes provide the purpose for the reader by specifying a reason for reading a particular passage before actual reading takes place. In other cases, it is assumed that reading passages on topics related to learners' specific needs will fulfill their real-world purposes, and thus stimulate their interest and involvement in reading.

Content-orientated approaches underlie many of the activities in courses like *Reading for a Purpose* (Bloor and Grant 1979) (a course for African schools) and *Reasons for Reading* (Davies and Whitney 1979). Both these courses use a variety of original texts from a wide range of current sources (fiction and non-fiction), and require the learner to extract specific information from the texts (rather than reading the whole text in detail) or perform specific operations with the texts like, for example, following a set of instructions or solving problems.

In the following exercise extract from Reading for a Purpose (p.9) the reader is directed to find certain information from encyclopaedia entries:

Obi wants to find out the main imports and exports of Africa. He is checking each country in turn and completing a chart. To help Obi, read the entry on Ethiopia again and complete the chart as quickly as possible.

Country	Imports	Exports
Ethiopia		

A completely different type of text (a Hospital Guide) is used for a similar information - seeking exercise in *Reasons for Reading* (p.21):

HOSPITAL GUIDE		
GROUND FLOOR		FIRST FLOOR
WEST ←	EAST →	
Room 1 Admissions	Room 1 New Patients	Room 1 Social Workers
Room 2 Prescriptions	Room 2 Out Patients	Room 2 Hospital Secretary
Room 3 Hearing Aids	Room 3 Bank	Room 3 Children's Ward
Room 4 Eye Tests	Room 4 Cafeteria	Room 4 Old People's Ward
Room 5 Blood Tests	Room 5 X-Ray	Room 5 Maternity Ward

The reader is required to answer such questions as Where do new patients go? Where is the Maternity Ward?

Such purpose-directed activities have a direct tie-up with training in study skills (for example, the use of reference materials where specific information is required) and with certain so-called reading skills like skimming and scanning.

Study Skills in English (Wallace 1980) includes similar content-orientated exercises. This p.9 exercise requires the student to read (or “look through”) the passage three times, each time for a different purpose:

Exercise 2

- 1 Read the passage on ‘Carbon’ below (p. 10), with the following purpose: to find out what nylon is made from. Which part of the passage satisfies this purpose? Give line numbers.
- 2 Now look through the passage again with this purpose in mind: to find out what we mean by ‘Hydrocarbor’. Find the information as quickly as you can. Give line numbers.
- 3 Lastly read it with this purpose: to find out what is ‘special’ about carbon atoms. Give line numbers.

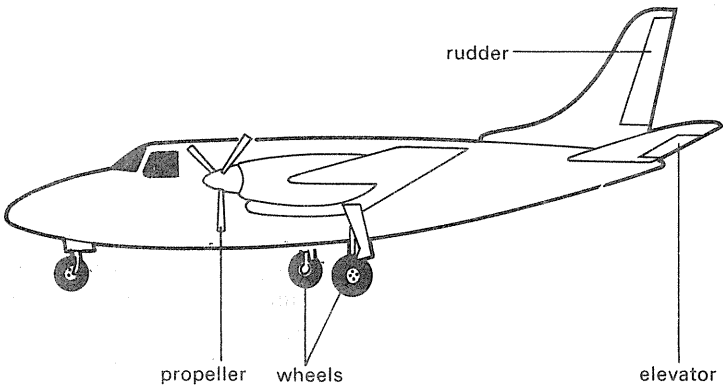
Such exercises focus essentially on items of information rather than on linguistic features or recognition of form. They can be contrasted, for example, with many of the exercises in *Concepts in Use* (book 1 of the *Reading and Thinking in English* series) which also establish a *purpose*, but a purpose essentially linguistic - that is, the reader’s attention is on manipulating the language, rather than on the *meaning*.

Patterns 3

system —————> capability
A bat uses a type of radar system. It can avoid objects.
= A bat’s radar system enables it to avoid objects.

Task 6

Use the diagram to match the parts and the abilities.



PARTS

- 1 the radio
- 2 the wheels
- 3 the propellers
- 4 the rudder
- 5 the elevator
- 6 the altimeter

ABILITIES

- a the pilot knows the height of the plane
- b the plane can move forward
- c the aeroplane can land
- d the pilot can communicate with the control tower
- e the plane can turn
- f the plane can ascend or descend

Published courses, on the whole, have a tendency to be pre-occupied with the minutiae of purpose. In the real world, reading fulfils very broad purposes like reading for enjoyment or for keeping up with world news, as well as specific career- or education-orientated demands. The value of purpose-based courses is that the student can be trained to see reading as a goal-directed activity, but the problem is that the direction and purpose is given by the course writer and does not stem from the learner's own purposes and needs.

Wallace in *Study Skills in English*, however, takes the idea of purpose very seriously and, as well as providing purpose-directed activities like the example given above, seeks to develop the learner's *awareness* of the importance of purpose in reading. The following exercise (p.9) demonstrates this:

Exercise 1

Different purposes require different kinds of reading material. Suggest the *kind* of reading material which one might use to fulfil the purposes under A. What do you think of the purposes under B? In what way are they different from those in A?

Reasons for reading:

- A
- 1 to get a general idea of what a particular subject is all about, expressed in language that is not too technical.
 - 2 to pass the time.
 - 3 to keep up-to-date with what is happening in the world.
 - 4 to find some information that might be useful for an essay.
 - 5 to get information about a country one intends to visit.
- B
- 1 because the book is on the course booklist.
 - 2 to keep up with the other students.

The book also encourages the students to specify their *own* purposes before reading academic texts, and to formulate questions which they might seek to answer while reading.

Not all content-orientated courses overtly mention purpose. Some are based on texts selected for their thematic or topic interest. A reading series published in the early 1970s - *The English Studies Series* (ed. Mackin) - provides a collection of reading passages on each of a number of specific subject fields: for example, on Chemistry, Engineering and Agriculture. These books are designed to use with a teacher, although each passage is fully annotated. Readers can be expected to approach the text with interest and purpose since the content is related to their own specific field. *The English Studies Series* was probably produced before its time although, no doubt, many individual learners have benefitted from the opportunities such collections of texts provide. Many teachers find specialist collections difficult to use with all but the best readers, partly because of their own feeling of inadequacy in specialist areas. More recent developments in ESP teacher training, and the development of liberal attitudes which specify the role of the teacher as manager rather than as fount-of-all-knowledge,

permit ESP/EAP students in many classrooms to read more freely in their own field. Such students are often able to enter into thoughtful interaction with the text - partly, at least, because they are familiar with the relevant concepts and appropriate frames of reference.

4. The Pedagogically-Orientated Approach

Of course, pedagogic considerations are a part of all good course design, and reading courses are no exception. All of the published courses that I have mentioned so far have pedagogic strengths in that their authors have considered such matters as the length of time students might wish to spend on a given activity, the entertainment quality of the activities, and the interest value of the texts.

In presenting what I call a pedagogically-orientated approach, I am addressing those courses where learning theories are the prime motivation for the design of the *total course* rather than the design of individual exercises. For some years now native-speaker reading development programmes and some distance-teaching reading for second language readers have involved "reading boxes" or sets of reading cards which are designed for reading at the learner's own individual rate of progress.

A recent course of this type is Jolly's *Reading Choices* (1982), which is a set of reading cards prepared specifically for self-access work on certain pedagogic assumptions. The Teacher's Book comments: "Textual difficulty for any individual student depends on a number of factors, not simply on those of lexical frequency and grammatical complexity. The same text will appear difficult to one student and easier to another often for no reasons than differences in motivation, previous knowledge of the topic or text type. These factors transcend mere linguistic description."

According to this view, readers who are given some choice in the selection of their own reading materials and who can develop at their own rates will be more successful readers than those whose programme of studies is directed by the teacher, the coursebook or the administrator.

Another important assumption is that the interests of the students are best served if control of the reading activity is left in their hands (rather than those of the teacher) with respect to choice of topic, text type, textual function, apparent difficulty *and* amount of help required in understanding texts. On the question of difficulty, Jolly's approach differs from that of some earlier sets of reading cards in that the cards are not graded in level from the point of view of language complexity, although they do vary in length and text type.

The exercises in *Reading Choices* are varied. They are largely content-orientated but they do include vocabulary- and structure-related exercises; but such exercises are subservient to the reading itself. Jolly (1984) is on record as being opposed to what he calls "an excessive concern with linguistic detail" and, moreover, in this course at least he is not concerned to develop reading skills "discretely". His aim is "to allow the student to do his own reading and transfer natural L1 reading skills to the foreign language." For this reason, the approach of the course writer is not revealed in exercise types but rather in the organisation of the reading materials. The exercises are, in effect, superfluous to the objectives of allowing students the time and opportunity to read in English.

It is claimed that courses which permit individuals to assume responsibility for their own work also help the learner to a position of independence of the teacher, which is ultimately essential for any reading course since reading has to be an individual activity.

EVALUATING APPROACHES TO READING DEVELOPMENT

Four approaches to the design of reading courses have been identified, and each of these approaches has its own characteristics. The table below summarises the focus of each approach.

ORIENTATION	FOCUS	TRAINING APPROACH
psychological	the reader	the psychological process
linguistic	the language of the text	linguistic knowledge
content	meaning and use	reading for a purpose
pedagogic	individual access	personal control

These four approaches are not mutually exclusive and, as has already been pointed out, some authors draw on more than one approach. Factors like level, length and organisation influence the look of a set of materials; but if we set such considerations aside, we might ask if there is any way in which a principled evaluation of these approaches might be made.

This is not an easy question to answer. The most important consideration is whether or not the approach gets results in the sense that the reading levels of the learners improve. Unfortunately, it is difficult to test materials on any comparative basis because of the variables of the testing situation. Moreover - if Jolly is right, and the learner's freedom of choice in reading is the most importance variable - the factor of content suitability (that is, how far the learner is interested in the content of the reading passage) would distort any results one might obtain; the most successful course might be one based on any of the four approaches although it would be difficult to establish the real reasons for its success.

When selecting a reading course for a particular group of students, it might prove to be more important to investigate the nature of the reading texts, the subject matter, genre, style and interest value, rather than the author's orientation or training approach. Alderson and Urquhart (1984:120) suggest that students might be free to choose their own reading material and even bring it from outside the classroom, and that the teacher might abandon formal questioning on the texts. Humbles (1979) provides evidence that a class of Saudi Arabian electronics students improved their reading simply by reading subject textbooks in English and without any exercises.

READING AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Many course designers are not solely concerned with reading development, and many teachers select a reading course in the hope that it will help their students to learn English. Traditionally, reading in a foreign language has been intricately intertwined with language teaching itself. Michael West, as long ago as 1926, argued that reading ability was very easily achieved and that emphasis on reading in a foreign language,

even with elementary learners, would facilitate language learning. He reported experiments that showed that the grammar of the language and a large (though passive) vocabulary could be acquired by reading before students were expected to speak in English (reported in West 1960). West referred to this as the “so-called reading method” of language learning.

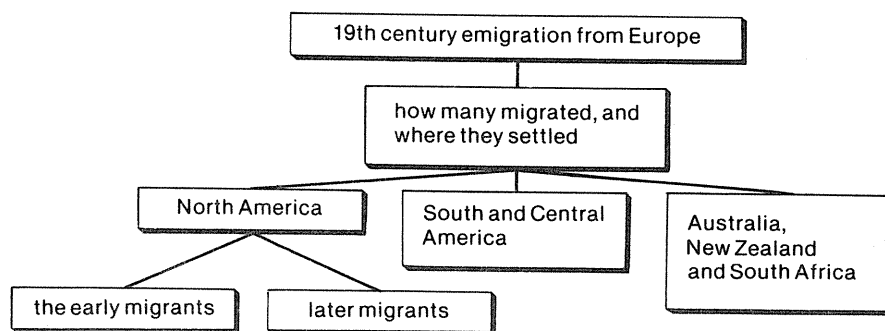
Part of most intensive reading activities extend beyond reading itself. They are concerned with general language learning or are designed to support the writing skill. The project work *Box Kites*, reported by Herbolich (1980) in which students read a variety of reference materials and made kites themselves, was directed towards the production of technical manuals - a writing activity. *Panorama* - an advanced course of English for study and examinations (Williams 1982), which includes discussion, note-taking and writing as well as reading includes work on the rhetorical structure of reading texts which is particularly useful as support for academic writing, as can be seen from this p.16 example:

Modern migrations

1 Read the following paragraph:

The biggest migration in man's history was the exodus from Europe during the 19th century. Probably as many as 70 million people left, to settle chiefly in the Americas, Australia and South Africa. The early emigrants to North America were mainly from North-Western Europe. But as communications and information improved, more people emigrated from Eastern and Southern Europe, bringing the total number of emigrants to the USA and Canada to about 45 million. Approximately 20 million people settled in South and Central America, coming chiefly from Spain, Portugal and Italy. And about 5 million emigrated to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

If you study the paragraph again, you will see that it has the structure:



All paragraphs are *structured*, i.e. deliberately built around one topic. The topic is placed early in the paragraph (preferably the first sentence), so that the reader can more easily see what type of information the paragraph contains. The topic is developed by one or more major support points, all of which are connected with the topic. And major support points are often developed by minor support points.

Panorama also includes "Study reading questions", some of which are designed to teach the language in the sense of extending an appreciation of grammatical structure. For example, the sentence

"The introduction of new high-yield wheat and rice in parts of Asia and Africa since 1967 created a wave of optimism."

is related to the question

"What created a wave of optimism? (Give the extended subject, and its principal noun)".

Another course with complex aims is the *Skills for Learning* series (produced by a team of writers, and directed by Sinclair). This course is based on six stated principles (extracted from Development : Teacher's Book vi) - one of which is psychological (5 below), two linguistic (1 and 3), one partly content-orientated (6), one pedagogic (4). The remaining principle (2) claims to be economic (a factor most authors do not mention and which has not figured in my model), but in fact this "principle" is a justification for the type of text selected, which has not been the subject of this paper.

Principles

The design of the course is based on the following principles:

- 1 That there is a core of language – for example, certain structures of argument and forms of presentation – which can be identified as 'academic' and which is non-subject-specific.
- 2 That teaching this core of language is more economical and cost-effective in terms of time spent in preparing teaching materials than the usual ESP materials which duplicate this core material with text content-specific to each discipline.
- 3 That the language resources available to the student in dealing with these texts and tasks should be progressively increased.
- 4 That self-help should be central to the methodology of the course as the students are adults.
- 5 That the reading process involves a dialogue between the reader and the writer and therefore an interactive approach which is based on group and class activity should be adopted in the teaching of reading.
- 6 That the ability to ask for and give information is an indispensable skill in the learning process. Therefore spoken communication is a feature of all lessons, and lessons with the specific purpose of encouraging students to develop their ability to think and talk in English have been included.

As can be seen from (3) and (6) above, *Skills for Learning* incorporates general language development and spoken communication among its aims.

The view that reading feeds language learning is in a sense the reverse of the linguistic approach, where, as we have seen, exercises on the language itself are incorporated with the aim of improving reading. In the evaluation of reading development courses we are, of course, not primarily concerned with wider language teaching objectives but we are concerned with how far a knowledge of aspects of “grammar” such as the relationship of active to passive forms and of relative clauses to participial phrases (as we find in *Reading Comprehension Course* Units 4 and 5) are helpful in improving reading comprehension.

In reality there is almost certainly an ill-understood cyclical process at work, whereby knowing something of the language helps the student to acquire more language, which in turn helps the student to read better, and so on. There is now evidence that this cyclical process also operates for native speakers since they have been shown to use in writing, forms that they have only previously encountered in written texts (Perera 1985).

CONCLUSION

Teachers faced with the problem of selecting a published course have, in 1985, a reasonable choice. In this article I have tried to investigate some of the approaches taken by course designers and authors, and I have illustrated these from just a few of the good course books available. I have also tried where possible to indicate some theoretical influences and some supportive research.

Although there are many strongly-held views on methods for improving reading ability, it is not, of course, possible to guess at a method which is good for all. The best we can hope for is that teachers will first investigate their students' needs and then search for the book or produce the course which will satisfy them. Needs analysis should take into account the role of reading in the course. If it is included as a support for developing general language competence or as a means of improving other skills, the teacher will look for a book like *Panorama*, *Skills for Learning*, or *Study Skills in English*.

On the other hand, the teacher who has space on a course for “pure” reading development will have to decide on whether she favours materials that focus on content, pedagogical style, linguistic features, psychological processes, or some mixture of these, and how far she considers directed activities, exercises or questions to be a necessary part of the programme.

Whatever approach is selected, all good reading courses must require the student to spend most of the time engaged in reading. It is cautionary to remember that any success that might be claimed for a particular philosophy might be more simply attributed to the activity of reading itself.

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