Can Text be too Friendly?

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In order to make text attractive and accessible to readers, writers may add supporting or facilitating information. In texts of the *characteristic* topic type, this supporting information may include narrative accounts, questions to the reader, and the use of examples. The use of narrative accounts may disguise the topic type and make it difficult for the reader to realise what the text is trying to convey. Examples may be unknown to the reader, may result in the use of unfamiliar vocabulary not directly related to the topic, and confuse the particular with the general. Awareness of topic type may help overcome some of these difficulties.

INTRODUCTION

If students have to read the following text what would they be expected to learn and remember?

The Reef Heron

If we were to hide with field-glasses behind a handy clump of reeds on a tidal mud-flat or a rocky shore, sooner or later we would almost certainly see a reef heron, or blue heron, as it is sometimes called.

It is taller than the gulls, and its feathers are battleship grey. It stands as still as a stuffed bird in a museum; but if we watch carefully we see that every minute or so it moves a pace or two forward to keep up with the retreating tide . . .

(School Publications, 1970)

We argue that there are two types of information in this text: (a) the essential content which the writer wishes the reader to assimilate, and (b) extra information which is used, among other functions, to make the text more interesting and thus facilitate the transfer of the essential content. In this particular text, the essential content, called from now on Central Information is:

A reef heron is sometimes called a blue heron
It is taller than the gulls
Its feathers are battleship grey
It stands very still

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Every minute or so it moves a pace or two forward to keep up with the retreating tide

[It can be found] on tidal mud-flats or a rocky shore

The extra information, which we shall refer to as Facilitating includes:

We would see a heron if we were to hide with field-classes behind a handy clump of reeds

. . . sooner or later [we would] almost certainly [see] . . . etc.

This distinction between Central and Facilitating Information is not the same as the common distinction between Main and Supporting Ideas (cf. Baumann 1986), since both main and supporting ideas may be central, in our terms. It has more to do with the distinction between what Meyer (1975) calls Content and Signalling information, though our conception of Facilitating information is broader.

While at times it may be difficult to establish the criteria for making the distinction, it seems to us an intuitively satisfying one. We assume that in the text above, the author's aim is to instruct as to the attributes of the reef heron, and the presence of these attributes in the text is comparatively easy to establish. Any other information can then be assigned to the Facilitating category. Moreover, as will be seen later, the presence of Central Information remains constant in texts of this kind, whereas the presence or absence of Facilitating Information seems to depend on the age of the audience.

Most often facilitating information has a positive effect on the interaction between the reader and the text. It can have this positive effect by increasing the meaningfulness of the text by helping the reader relate it to past experience, by clarifying possibly obscure or unfamiliar points, and by attracting the reader by making the text like a narrative. Occasionally, however, the attempt to make a text more friendly can have a negative effect on comprehending or learning from the text. For example, facilitating information in a text may distract the reader into thinking that what needs to be remembered from the text are the narrative events rather than the non-narrative informative content.

To see how this might happen we examine texts which all exemplify a common topic type. We will look at the supporting information in a set of *characteristics* texts to see the different kinds of supporting information, and the effects that it may have. This article suggests that awareness of the topic type of a text will allow learners to distinguish what is important and what is not and therefore not be confused or misled by a too friendly text.

THE CHARACTERISTICS TOPIC TYPE

The texts used in this study belonged to the *characteristics* topic type (Johns and Davies, 1983). Texts of this type describe what something is like. They may, for example, describe a particular bird or animal, a place, object or substance. The constituents of the characteristics topic type are as follows:

defining features or attributes > tests or measures of + data + exemplar or group.

This representation indicates that **defining features or attributes** are obligatory, while the other constituents are optional.

The characteristics topic type was chosen for this study because it is very common across a range of disciplines (Kay, 1991), and is particularly common in the material written for children which, as we shall show, tends to contain much facilitating information. The type is also rather loosely organized, which perhaps allows the use of a range of facilitating information.

The following text, from a New Zealand School Journal (Melser, 1975) is an example of the type of text used in this study:

> Dugongs are sea-cows. They live in warm seas in different parts of the world. They feed on the sea-grasses growing in the shallow waters off the coast.
>
> A fully-grown dugong is about three metres long. It has a small head and small eyes. It has two flippers and a tail like a fish. Its lips are big and strong and are used to pull off leaves and stems and push them into its mouth. Its nostrils open when it pokes its head out of the water to breathe, and close again when it goes back underwater.
>
> The male dugong has tusks which he uses to dig up roots and other food from the sea-bed. Dugongs are peaceful animals. They do not use their tusks to fight.
>
> The dugong's calf is born underwater. Then the mother brings it up to the surface. For a few hours, she swims there with the baby on her back. Slowly, she goes underwater, until it has learned to swim. After that, the calf swims along beside her. She feeds it with milk from two teats under her flippers. Sometimes a mother dugong has twins.

Table 1 shows this text analysed as a **characteristics** text[1].

Study of a wide range of examples of the characteristics topic type reveals the following features.

1   The example or group category can be the thing in general, a subcategory of the thing in general, or a particular case (in the *Dugongs* text, the discussion deals with dugongs in general, then the subcategories of fully-grown dugongs and male dugongs).

Table 1:

An Example of Text Analysis: Dugongs			
Example or Group	Features or Attributes	Tests or Measures	Data
Dugongs	are sea-cows		
	live in warm seas in different part of the world		
	feed on the sea-grasses growing in shallow waters off the coast.		
A fully-grown dugong	is about three metres long.		
	It has a big body, small head and small eyes. It has two flippers and a tail like a fish.		
	Its lips are big and strong		and are used to pull off leaves and stems and push them into its mouth.
	Its nostrils open when it pokes its head out of the water to breathe, and close again when it goes back underwater.		
The male dugong	has tusks		which he uses to dig up roots and other food from the sea-bed.
Dugongs	are peaceful animals.	They do not use their tusks to fight.	
			The dugong's calf is born underwater. Then the mother brings it up to the surface. For a few hours, she wims there with the baby on her back. Slowly, she goes underwater, until it has learned to swim. After that, the calf swims along beside her. She feeds it with milk from two teats under her flippers. Sometimes a mother dungong has twins. (Melser, 1975:35-36)

2   The features or attributes category can include defining features, physical structure information (particularly parts and properties), extra information, or generalizations.

3   The test or measures category is subordinate to the features or attributes category and is used to confirm a feature's existence. (In the *Dugongs* text, the "peaceful" attribute is confirmed.)

4   The data category is also subordinate to the features or attributes category and elaborates a stated or sometimes unstated feature. (In the *Dugongs* text, the unstated feature is "Dugongs give birth to and rear their young in a way which is different from other sea-mammals".)

Often a characteristic topic type occurs in conjunction with another topic type. Gerald Durrell's books on his expeditions are striking examples of this, where state/situation text occurs with characteristics descriptions of specimens both as species and particular examples (Fountain and Nation, 1976).

THE TEXTS

Many of the texts looked at in this study are taken from Parts 2 and 3 of the New Zealand *School Journal*. These journals are available to all New Zealand primary schools and contain factual articles, short stories, short plays and poems. Parts 2 and 3 are intended for eight- to eleven-year-old readers. They are written in a lively, informative manner with a careful concern for readability. They are intended primarily to be enjoyable and to attract children to reading.

Eighteen typical Characteristics texts were sampled from the *School Journal* Part 2 and Part 3 from the years 1968-1987. The selection criteria were:

a.   They had to be description texts which contained the Characteristics topic type. Those which were predominantly composed of other topic types, e.g. Physical Structure, were excluded.

b.   They had to be biological texts. Some Characteristics texts which were scientific in nature but were not concerned with biology were not selected. This was because as part of a broader study, they were to be compared with texts from sixth-form biology books.

c.   They had to have as the first priority an informative intention of describing something to readers. Texts which contained some Characteristics information but did not have this as their primary intention were excluded.

d.   The percentage of Characteristics information in prospective sample texts had to be higher than the percentage of the information of other topic types. Texts which contained Characteristics information, the percentage of which was lower than that of other information, were excluded.

TYPES OF FACILITATING INFORMATION IN CHARACTERISTICS TEXTS

1. *Time-Related Accounts*

Harris (1986) points out that the organisation of texts can be classified into the *time-related organisation* and *the non-time-related organisation*. Thus, time-related texts include narrative and any other kind of text which is organised on a chronological basis (e.g. a report on a school visit or a result of a seminar). The eliciting question for a writer and a reader is *What happened next?* In this study facilitating information which is presented through the time-related organisation is named *time-related accounts*. They can be divided into two sub-categories: *narratives or stories* and *past-time-related accounts*. The difference between them is that: narratives have their own set of conventions which are typically referred to as a story grammar, i.e. a setting, theme, plot and resolution (Guthrie 1977); past-time-related accounts do not have the complete structure of a story. The first example is a narrative and the second one is a past-time-related account.

> About two thousand years ago in Italy, a dolphin took a boy to school each day. The boy's school was across the bay from his home. Every morning, the boy called out at the water's edge and the dolphin would come racing up to him . . . One day, the boy became very ill and died soon after. Each day, the dolphin waited anxiously for the boy who never came. It was not long before the dolphin became sick and died, too . . .
> (Dolphins – Man's Friends in the Sea p.32-33).

> Once, while I was fishing from my dinghy in Pukerua Bay, I heard a loud whoosh behind me. I turned around to see twelve glistening dolphins heading out to sea. They must have been near Pukerua Bay for some time as other people had seen them from a boat several days before
> (Dolphins – Man's Friends in the Sea p.35).

Time-related accounts are usually marked by: (a) the simple past tense (b) past-time markers (e.g. 'about two thousand years ago', 'in 1963 and 1964' etc.). They are used to capture the readers' interest or stimulate their curiosity to follow the rest of the texts, to present texts in the form of a narrative, or to provide semantic content to the readers. Though they make texts more interesting and enjoyable to read, they may make it difficult for the readers to understand texts or may distract the readers from the semantic content. These may occur when the semantic content is profoundly embedded in time-related accounts or when they are predominant over the semantic content.

2. *Writer's Address to the Readers*

Fountain and Nation (1976) call discourse items where the writers express their opinions and communicate with the readers *author to reader comment*. Likewise, the writers of Characteristics texts and others communicate to their readers through this technique but with more variety of intention (i.e. introducing texts to the readers, introducing other types of facilitating information, signalling central information, drawing the readers' attention to certain pieces of information, appealing to the readers' past experience, serving as a device which the writers use to communicate personally with the readers, or providing instructions as a starting point for learning. In this study the discourse which contains the writer's contact with the readers is termed *writer's address to the readers*. It can be classified into two sub-categories: *writer's direct address* and *writer's indirect address*. One differs from the other in that pronouns *I, You,* and *We* are present in the writer's direct address whereas they are not in the writer's indirect address. However, we know that the writers are addressing the readers because there is some degree of reference outside the texts which includes the readers in indirect ways. This is marked by: (a) questions (e.g. *What is the friendliest creature in the ocean?*) (b) near pointer-words (i.e. *here, now*) (c) sentence adverbials (e.g. *obviously, fortunately, frankly,* etc.) (d) the introductory *it* (e.g. it is not surprising that . . ., etc.). The first and the second of the following excerpts are examples of the writers' direct addresses and the third one is an example of the writer's indirect address.

> When *you* watch Blue penguins shooting along underwater, *you* can plainly see why their scientific name is "Eudyptula", which means "small beautiful diver"
> (The Smallest Penguin of All p.41).

> Carpet pythons are often kept as pets in haysheds and storage barns to eat mice and rats. They've even been used to stop thieves. *Would you steal a car with a python wrapped around the steering wheel?*
> (Fact Sheet on Australian Carpet Pythons p.39).

> New Zealand is sometimes called "the home of penguins" because the oldest fossil penguin was found *here*   (The Smallest Penguin of All p.35).

The writers' address to the readers may serve several functions as mentioned earlier. It provides the writers an option for presenting Characteristics texts. However, if it accounts for a high percentage of information in texts, it may hide the semantic content from the readers.

3. *Descriptive Information about the Context in which we Find the Thing*

When presenting generalised descriptions about things, writers sometimes put them in context. Their focus seems to be on the context or on the relationship of other entities in the context to the thing rather than on the things themselves. In this way,

the readers can discover other aspects of the things being described. Moreover, this descriptive information helps to provide the readers with background knowledge which they may use to understand texts better. In this study it is named *descriptive information about the context in which we find the thing*. It can be categorized into:

1. an agent(s) or what an agent(s) is doing to the thing

    Now, every year, a committee of people from all the countries interested in protecting whales counts up the numbers of whales caught the year before. They decide how many whales are needed to keep the whale herds from becoming extinct. The whalers are then told exactly how many animals they can catch next season . . .   (Whales p.27).

2. another entity(s) which is described in relation to the main thing

    Seabirds called petrels and gannets nest on these islands . . . Just as the seabirds make it possible for the geckos to live, so geckos make it possible for an insect to live. This insect is a tiny red mite which lives in the folds of the gecko's skin   (Geckos p.18).

3. description of the place in which we find the thing

    These are 15 miles off the coast of the North Island of New Zealand, level with the Waipoua Forest. It is a very warm area . . .

The two main islands are Aorangi and Tawhiti Rahi. They have steep cliffs and rocky beaches. Grass, flax, scrub and trees grow on them   (Geckos pp.17-18).

4. ***Examples***

Finally the facilitating information can involve reference to an example or examples, which appeal to common experience.

Pelorus Jack was a Risso's dolphin.

                                        (Blair, 1972:38)

The biggest whale of this type is the sperm whale. The whale in Moby Dick was a sperm whale.

                                        (Cawthorn, 1976:19)

SCHOOL JOURNAL TEXTS V SCIENCE TEXTS

We compared the incidence of facilitating information of different kinds in our school journal characteristics text with the incidence in texts of the same topic type in 6 science textbooks. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2:

The Frequency of Occurrence of Facilitating Information in journal and text-book characteristics texts			
Types of Facilitating Information	School Journals*	Science Textbooks	Total
time-related accounts	11	1	12
the writer's address to the readers	17	14	31
descriptive information about the context in which we find the thing	8	1	9

* To make the numbers of texts equivalent between the school journals and science textbooks, the numbers were divided by 3.

As can be seen from the table, both genres contain both central and facilitating material. However, while the incidence of address to the audience is similar in both genres, both time-related accounts and contextually descriptive information is far rarer in science textbooks. Presumably such information is considered redundant in texts designed for the older readers, who would be expected perhaps to supply the context for themselves. In addition, in the case of time-related accounts, which often supply a personal element, it may be that the facilitating information is intended to make the text more friendly for younger readers.

THE EFFECTS OF FACILITATING INFORMATION

As mentioned before, facilitating information can have beneficial effects. (1) It can increase the meaningfulness of the characteristics information by relating it to past experience that is familiar to the reader, thus making it easier to assimilate and remember. (2) It can clarify points that might be difficult to understand. (3) It can attract and involve the reader. Instead of being presented with a range of diverse features or attributes, the reader is carried along by the narrative sequence.

However, it is possible for a text to be too friendly, and for the facilitating information to have a negative effect.

For example, if the facilitating information is too pervasive, it can distract the reader from the central information in the text, and thus hid the instructional purpose. Time-related accounts may dominate the central information, and thus act as

distractors rather than facilitators. Similarly, if Descriptive information accounts for a high percentage of the text, the reader may have difficulty distinguishing central from facilitating content.

Furthermore, facilitating material may bring in vocabulary which is not normally associated with the topic in question, and which is unknown to the reader.

> You must have watched gulls *scrapping* over food on a beach, in a town park or at a rubbish *tip* . . .
>
> <div align="right">(Barrie, 1969:45)</div>

> When I was little, I kept cactus plants. I liked their weird shapes and spines, and found they were very easy to grow. I'm not very good at remembering to water pot plants, but my cacti didn't seem to mind if I forgot occasionally.

> Like all plants, cacti need water. But cacti belong to a special group of plants (called "succulents") that are able to do without water for longer than most.
>
> <div align="right">(Shannon, 1993:11)</div>

The new vocabulary may be useful for the learners who wish to pursue the topic further. Note *cactus, spines* and *succulents*. But also note *weird*.

This problem of facilitating information containing unfamiliar and unpredictable vocabulary also occurs in exam papers and lectures where tasks and procedures are "contextualized" to make them seem more relevant.

> 1   A roof slopes at 42° to the horizontal. If it measures 6 metres from ridge to eaves, how high is the ridge above the eaves?
>
> 2   A surveyor sets two upright graduated poles at two places 5 metres apart measured along the ground. Looking through a theodolite (set horizontally and in line with the poles) the nearer pole gives a reading of 2.3 metres and the farther one 1.6 metres. What is the angle of slope of the ground between the two poles?
>
> 3   A ramp leading to a first-floor garage is 12 metres long. If the vertical rise is 2.2m, find the angle of elevation of the ramp.

It is very difficult to prepare for the language of such examples. Even though learners are well in control of the mathematics, unravelling the problem may be beyond them because of the unknown vocabulary.

The use of particular examples may also make it more difficult to distinguish what is generalisable to other members of the group from what is particular to the example.

While she was talking to me, Mrs Ujdar caught a fish and offered it to the heron. It hopped on to the cockpit roof and walked across to take the fish out of her hand . . . Back home I rang the Department of Conservation and was told that, although the white heron was very sociable, it was rare for one to feed out of a person's hand.

<div align="right">(Menefy, 1992:12-13)</div>

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. When using school journals as sources of factual information, teachers should make it clear to students that there are two types of information in the texts: one they have to understand and remember, the other they may use to help them in understanding the texts better and may ignore at a later stage.

2. Students may find Johns and Davies' terminology difficult, but there is no need to use their terms. Teachers may ask questions based on the Characteristics topic type by using easier terms to guide students' comprehension. The questions may be like these:

   a.   What is the text telling us about? (Example/Group)

   b.   What are the features of the thing being described? (Features/Attributes)

   c.   How do you know that the feature really exists? (Tests/Measures)

   d.   Can you find other information about this thing from the text? (Data)

3. Since the technique of classification is not used in journal texts, a classification activity is useful in preparing students for the pragmatic organisation found in science texts. For this activity, teachers may ask students to subcategorise features of the thing being described into groups, e.g. defining features, general features, and so on.

4. A numbering and underlining exercise may be used. For these activities students are asked to number or underline the information which they think is Characteristics information.

5. Diagrams may be used. These help students form a visual image of the texts. Likewise, they will help them decide what is important to remember as well as help them organise the information for later recall. A diagram may consist of:

   a.   Example/Group being in the centre,

   b.   Features/Attributes providing descriptions of Example/Group,

c.　Tests/Measures providing evidence to confirm the existence of Features/Attributes,

d.　Data elaborating Features/Attributes.

CONCLUSIONS

Characteristics texts for second language learners should not be free from supporting information such as narrative, examples, or investigations. In the majority of cases, these friendly features of text are really friendly and they achieve their goals of making text attractive and accessible.

Where the text is "too friendly", a topic type approach with the learners well in control of the constituents of the topic type is one way to reduce the effect of the difficulties. This control involves most of all being able to recognize that the text is a characteristics text. That is, that the information goal of the text is to tell the reader what something is like. This will help the reader see that the "friendly" wrapping of narrative or examples is of secondary importance. Secondly, the control involves the learners being able to distinguish the features that are being described, and thus being able to recognize what is supporting "friendly" information. In this way difficulties in the supporting information can be ignored, or guessed at, and not given a prominence they do not deserve.

[1] The form of analysis shown here differs from that of Johns & Davis in the addition of a 'data' column.

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