

A READING PROGRAM FOR RECORDS MANAGEMENT EMPLOYEES
AT AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION

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At many international organizations in Washington, D.C., where the majority of the employees are non-native speakers of English, considerable attention is given to the English language training of those employees either through in-house instruction programs or by contract with private language schools. Typically, the main target of this language instruction is the higher-level professional staff, due to their need for English in carrying out their work and to their high visibility as representatives of the organization in discussions, negotiations, seminars and travel. While they are hired on the basis of their technical ability, their proficiency in English is also carefully evaluated at the time of hiring, and English classes and tutoring are made available.

Unfortunately, the English proficiency of the lower-level administrative support staff is given little consideration, despite the fact that they greatly outnumber the professional staff they serve. While a great deal of time and money is spent on the training of support staff to carry out their duties, the effect of their English proficiency on the effective performance of those duties is often overlooked. There is often only cursory evaluation of proficiency levels at the time of hiring due to the lack of clear guidelines for the level of proficiency needed for certain jobs, which is frequently defined in the job descriptions as merely a "good command of English." Other than the common "business English for secretaries" courses, the only English language training provided to these staff is typically

of a very general nature and is seen to have little direct relevance to their jobs. Classes may be offered only a few hours a week and participation is optional, but often dependent on prior approval of supervisors under heavy work constraints. Thus, for administrative staff, the relationship between English proficiency and staff performance is rarely acknowledged or considered important enough to warrant a commitment on the part of the organization to provide systematic evaluation and language training.

Nevertheless, it seems clear that if relevant English language training were provided to these staff, the organization could realize the benefits of more efficient and effective use of staff capabilities, quicker training and less turnover of staff. The staff, in turn, could project a more effective image in providing service to the rest of the organization, and could realize better motivation, greater job satisfaction, and quicker advancement.

As an example of how a program of relevant English language training for administrative support staff could help realize these benefits, I would like to describe the position of a group of employees who work in the records management division of an international development bank in Washington, D.C. I will focus specifically on the reading component of their job, describing the types of written texts they work with, the reading activities they engage in and the most serious reading problems they encounter. I will then propose a way of designing a program to develop the reading skills they need.

Information about the position was gathered from the job description and from conversations with staff currently in the division. In addition, I have personal knowledge of the job acquired during

five years with the organization in various capacities in the division, including performing the particular job which is the subject of this study, and subsequently supervising and training staff in that position.

The purpose of the bank is to provide loans and technical assistance for economic development projects to member governments, primarily those of Third World countries. English is the official language of the organization, although the majority of the 6,000 employees are not native speakers of English.

The records management division is responsible for the acquisition, maintenance, storage and retrieval of all documentation of the bank related to its organization, structure, administration and operations. It is also responsible for ensuring the confidentiality of all bank documentation by controlling access to it. The division is divided into three sections, the largest of which is the Information Centers Section. There are a total of 40 employees with the title of "Documentation Assistant" working in 13 Information Centers. Sixteen are native speakers of English, and 24 are non-native speakers. It is the 24 non-native speakers in the Documentation Assistant position whom I will focus on in this study.

The Documentation Assistants (DA's), who range in age from 20 to 45, have a broad range of proficiency levels in English, from very basic general proficiency to near fluency. The length of time they have been in the United States ranges from six months to 15 years. DA's are required to pass a very basic aptitude test designed by division staff on skills relevant to records management before being hired. The only language skill evaluated in this test is reading, in English,

Spanish and French. The test is administered by presenting five short authentic cables, memos or letters in each language to the candidates, and having them answer a series of discrete point questions about them. There is no valid theoretical basis to the design of the test, nor does it in any way represent a true evaluation of the candidates' reading abilities. There is thus a need for a placement test to define the DA's English proficiency by isolating the reading skills needed in their job and providing a clear evaluation of those skills.

TEXT TYPES

DA's are required to read a broad variety of types of written texts for different purposes in carrying out their job. These text types can be broadly divided into four categories of documentation: operational, reference, administrative and divisional.

1. Operational Documentation

This category includes all material directly related to the operations of the organization, both internally and externally generated. It includes the following types of text: correspondence (letters, memos, cables); reports (feasibility, appraisal, progress, financial); agreements (loan, guarantee); procurement documents (bidding announcements, invitations, proposals, adjudication reports, contracts, amendments, purchase orders, letters of credit); maps, architectural drawings, flowcharts, equipment lists, statistical tables; lists of data on lending operations; and operational manuals.

Internally generated material is written in English by economists, lawyers, financial analysts, engineers and other technical

specialists. Material which is externally generated comes primarily from government ministries and other official government agencies, local development banks in the various countries, public industries, and various consultancy companies, as well as from agencies of the United Nations and other international organizations. It is usually written in English, often by non-native speakers with varying degrees of English proficiency or in a broad range of international varieties of English.

2. Reference Documentation

Reference documentation is always externally generated, and is not directly related in any way to organization projects but is relevant as a source of background information. This material includes: national development plans, population censuses, industrial profiles, economic surveys, and feasibility studies. This documentation comes from sources such as government agencies, private consulting firms, agencies of the United Nations, and other international organizations. Documents vary in size from one-page summary sheets of current United Nations activities, to small booklets and pamphlets, to multi-volume feasibility studies.

3. Administrative Documentation

This category includes all material used for the internal administration of the organization, such as: administrative manuals, general administrative circulars, supply catalogs, and forms (requisitions, overtime reports, sick leave forms, etc.).

4. Records Management Division Documentation

Included in this category is all material generated specifically for the internal use of the division, such as: memos (general infor-

mation, new procedures, instructions); procedural manuals; indexes and file guides; lists of data; bibliographic indexing rules; catalogue cards; forms (charge-out, statistical reports); and notes from the supervisor to the staff.

TEXT CHARACTERISTICS

The linguistic and discoursal characteristics of these text types were identified by an examination of two different authentic texts representative of those which DA's work with daily. The first was an economic study written by staff economists, and the second was from a booklet written by the public relations unit outlining the policies and procedures of the organization.

While the content, purpose and functions of these two texts are quite different, they have the following features in common: their use of a mixture of technical and non-technical terms dealing with economics and banking, in combination with other vocabulary of considerable semantic sophistication; complex sentence structure; lengthy sentences with a dense informational load and frequent nominalizations; complex discourse features in terms of the number of participants in the discourse process and their purposes; and a high degree of presupposition of knowledge about the policies and operations of the organization.

READING ACTIVITIES OF DA'S

The main reading activities which DA's engage in are the sorting, analyzing, indexing and cataloguing of operational and reference documentation, and the retrieval of this documentation for the use of bank

staff. DA's generally do not require in-depth understanding of all the terminology and issues included in the texts they deal with. Their function is more limited in scope to identifying the documentation type and specific document item, and determining enough about its subject and purpose to be able to assign it a classification title, summarize basic information about it onto a catalogue card, and retrieve the documentation.

The specific bits of information which DA's typically need to attend to in performing these activities are: country, originator and addressee, date, subject and purpose. They also must focus on such features as the loan number, project title, reporting period, contracting parties and bidding numbers, and determine whether the text is an official version, and an original, copy or draft version.

At times, the identification and retrieval of documentation may require a more complex set of tasks, such as tracing the development of the various phases of activity of a bank project, and integrating information from several different text sources. This activity inevitably calls for an understanding of the policies and operations of the organization as they relate to the information in the text.

READING PROBLEMS OF DA'S

Based on the training experience of supervisors in the Information Centers, the following have been identified as the main reading problems of new DA's undergoing training:

- 1) intensively reading an entire text, when only certain parts of that text are relevant for the performance of a particular task;
- 2) spending too much time reading documents that are not clearly

- identified and deciding what to do with them, or performing the wrong task because they are misidentified;
- 3) misinterpreting sketchy information communicated by telex;
 - 4) becoming confused by technical terminology and acronyms;
 - 5) giving too much importance to any and every mention of a topic;
 - 6) having difficulty in organizing, paraphrasing and summarizing information;
 - 7) being unable to interpret complex syntactic structures;
 - 8) having an insufficient background knowledge of organizational structure and operations to comprehend a text.

READING SKILLS NEEDED BY DA'S

Judging from the reading activities DA's must perform, and from an analysis of their reading problems, it appears that the main reading skills needed by DA's are: rapid reading, including skimming and scanning to locate specific information; recognizing identifiable characteristics of specific text types; decoding telegraphic language to reconstruct a message; determining general meaning from context; determining which details and terminology are essential to meaning and which can be ignored; determining topic, purpose and importance of documentation; and organizing, paraphrasing and summarizing information from a text or group of texts. In addition, some DA's may need some linguistic training in areas such as syntactic structure and vocabulary development. All of them would need to develop the required background knowledge of the organization through on the job training, and logically this would be integrated into all of the skills mentioned above.

READING MATERIALS

In deciding on the most appropriate materials to use in a reading development program for the DA's, I investigated whether there were any available reading texts designed to develop reading skills generally appropriate to the needs of this group, which could be adapted and modified to meet any more specific requirements and to bridge the gap between the reading text and the authentic texts DA's would read on the job. One of the reasons for choosing an available reading text is the fact that some of the reading skills needed by the DA's are not essentially different from those skills needed in other disciplines. Though there may be some variability in terms of the depth of understanding required by DA's in comparison with academic reading, for example, the basic skills are the same and could be developed to varying degrees.

One of the advantages of using a general graded reading text is that it allows one to develop the initial skills needed using what Widdowson (1979) refers to as "gradual approximation," or using text types that are at a lower level of difficulty than might be the case with the authentic bank texts, and gradually introducing more complex texts. Thus, one could more easily focus on specific reading skills without needing to decipher complex lexical items, syntactic structures and discourse features of the text. It is also sometimes easier to demonstrate a new skill or concept using material that is less familiar than what DA's work with every day. As Candlin et al (1976) have pointed out in their work on Doctor-Patient Communication Skills, this is partly a psychological question of the degree to which a familiar work situation can potentially distract from the language task to be

undertaken by "triggering off erroneous conditioned responses" (1976:247). This possibility is a very real one, particularly for those DA's who have been in their positions for years without ever really becoming proficient readers.

It also seems logical to choose a general reading text, keeping in mind the distinction Candlin and Breen (1979) make between authenticity to the target performance repertoire and authenticity to the process by which the learner becomes proficient in that performance. If materials are seen as a link between the learners' initial knowledge and skills and the target performance required, then the most important focus of materials is less on any particular target repertoire product than on the process by which the learner arrives at this goal. As long as the materials are authentic to the process of learning, they need not always directly mirror the actual product which learners may eventually be required to work with.

Two reading texts were found which would be suitable for meeting some of the needs of the DA's. Both were designed for use in an academic setting, but with some modifications, they could be adapted for this group.

The first text is Reading English for Academic Study (Long et al., 1980). The materials in this text are appropriate for the development of some, though not all of the reading skills needed by the DA's. The reading passages are at a level I think would be appropriate for most DA's. Each unit is divided into four parts: a "reading attack skill," a reading passage, two grammatical points organized notionally or functionally, and a section on vocabulary development. The unit first focuses on a particular reading strategy, such as skimming for specific

information, guessing vocabulary from context, recognizing word chains, and predicting while reading. These strategies are then practiced in a reading passage on the topic of the unit. This concentration on reading strategies would be especially useful for the DA's in developing the skills they require in rapid reading to locate specific information, determining general meaning from context, dealing with technical terminology, and determining topic, purpose and importance of documentation.

An essential feature of the text, and indeed of any reading text, is the extent to which it promotes reflection by the learner on the process by which reading strategies are derived. The discussion of these strategies is one of the prime objectives of this text, and thus of particular value for the DA's.

In view of the DA's difficulty in quickly retrieving specific information from the appropriate part of the text, the work on contextual reference features, information retrieval skills, and the rhetorical organization of text is especially appropriate. While some of the exercises in these areas are designed to stimulate the development of various reading strategies, others focus on form and are presented as models to be practiced and internalized. Thus, there is a distinction between "enabling" exercises and those which require the application of knowledge. Although these content areas are useful, the exercises could be more effective if they were presented in more of a problem-posing mode which required more interaction among the students, and if they allowed for much greater diversity of outcomes than is presently the case.

The materials take account of varying initial learner abilities

in an indirect way. They allow for students to define their own learning needs to a certain extent, in that they can suggest skipping certain exercises or concentrating on others. But there is not really enough variety of exercises to allow for much diversity of abilities, as would be the case with the DA's, or to accommodate various and changing needs of the students throughout the course. And there is no clear indication of how the materials would exploit differences in the social and cultural identities of the students, although this is known to be a key variable in comprehension of reading texts (Alderson and Urquhart, 1984).

For some DA's, the balance in the text between the amount of reading and the amount of information about the language would be appropriate, while for others, more reading passages would be useful. For all DA's, a greater variety of activities, tasks and exercises with more genuine communicative features would be desirable.

The second text examined was Reading and Thinking in English (The British Council, 1979, 1980), a series of four texts ranging from beginning level to advanced. This series would provide for the broad range of proficiency levels characteristic of the DA group. The text is very carefully structured and explicitly sets out for the students the relationship between the various sections of the text and how they build on each other. While it does not explicitly deal with syntactic structure, which some DA's may need work on, it refers the student to supplementary reference sources such as Leech and Svartvik's A Communicative Grammar of English, where such information can be found. Communicative functions are usefully presented in the text in a way that attempts to exploit the learners' existing knowledge of language, and

then extend that knowledge to include additional functions. By always presenting these functions in the context of a reading passage, learners are given an opportunity to focus on the aspects of the situation that are relevant to determining communicative value, which Widdowson (1979) has identified as an essential feature of communicative exercises. Such exercises would help alert DA's to the aspects of the text they need to focus on for various purposes.

The text also allows for varying initial contributions of learners by incorporating various language study questions in the margins of the reading passages. These questions are designed to aid the student's comprehension of the text, but if they are not needed, they may be ignored and the student may continue reading. Allen and Widdowson (1974) have promoted the use of this technique to clarify the relationships between sentences in a text and thereby make the reasoning process overt. This would be of particular value in developing the general comprehension of a text which DA's need in order to determine its purpose and importance, and to judge which details can safely be ignored. The text could be improved by extending throughout the book the concept of flexibility in approach demonstrated by the language study questions. The text could be structured in more self-contained units, such as the modular approach suggested by Candlin et al (1981), where the units would permit entry and exit at different points according to the needs of the students, rather than being set out in a fairly rigid order from beginning to end. This would allow for a more refined breakdown of DA proficiency not only by level but also by skill, and would permit DA's to focus on the specific concepts and reading skills they were having difficulty with, while omitting others.

As in the first text, this one places emphasis on giving learners a major role in interpreting the reading passages for themselves, and in comparing and justifying their interpretations with others, thereby discovering useful reading strategies. Materials thus serve less as models to be imitated than as examples to stimulate thinking and discussion.

The extent to which the learner's attitudes, beliefs, values and differing abilities are involved by the text increases as the series progresses from one book to the next. This is mainly accomplished by means of the group discussions and activities. The second book has suggestions for occasional preliminary and supplementary activities which become a more regular part of the text in the third book. These activities call for students to go beyond the material presented and relate the topic being discussed to their own experience. This would stimulate spontaneous discussion of the topic and help maintain a certain relevance of the text for the reader, which would be of particular concern with a group of adult learners such as the DA's who typically seek relevance in their learning tasks. Such exercises are also designed in a way that allows for different answers based on the students' own opinions, so they can incorporate their values and beliefs into their discussion with other students, another method of introducing relevance into the learning process.

But the extent to which communicative interaction is actually required in order to complete the exercises may be limited. Since they are so carefully programmed, and are intended to allow for individual work if desired, many of the discussion exercises are merely optional. However, it is in the discussion that most of the communi-

cative aspects of the text would be brought out and that the desired reading strategies could most usefully be developed and exchanged. In order to be most effective, it would be up to the teacher to ensure that the discussion exercises are sufficiently exploited for that reason.

The main problem most DA's would have with the text is that of the technical/scientific nature of the subject matter dealt with in the reading passages. The audience the text was written for is a heterogeneous group of university students in various disciplines. Although the scientific content is not greatly complex, DA's, who tend to have a liberal arts background and training in languages, would probably not be particularly motivated to learn about reading strategies via passages on radio transmitters, chemistry, parasitology, and how rocket motors and elevator lifts work. Some of the other passages may be suitable, however.

Each of these texts, then, has its advantages and disadvantages in meeting the needs of the DA's. The main difficulty with each of them is that their carefully graded structuring does not allow for enough flexibility to suit the heterogeneous needs and abilities of the DA's, and they do not include enough exercises on the same concept at different levels of abilities. Some DA's may need the explicit work in grammar and vocabulary offered by the first text, while others may have enough background in English to need only a reference source for grammar, such as suggested by the second text. Perhaps the best course of action would be to use sections or units of each text in constructing a course for the DA's, supplementing them with additional exercises as needed. In light of the differing abilities of the DA's, it would be

especially useful to have the materials arranged in a modular format to permit students to concentrate as much as or little on each reading strategy and communicative function as their needs dictate.

It would also be advantageous to the DA's to have authentic text material incorporated into each concept or function they are focusing on, thus providing for explicit application of reading strategies to their work. One effective way of extending this application would be to devise activities which would focus on a variety of text types, using, for example, a memo on the preparation status of a particular project together with statements from the operational manual explaining the purpose of operational missions and the structure of the project cycle, from identification and preparation to loan approval and disbursement. The bank's project cycle would lend itself well to the type of graphic representation frequently used in both of the textbooks. By integrating information they have gotten from these different sources, the students could then proceed to examine the structure of the file guide, and select the proper classification category and title. The examination of authentic texts would also be useful in giving DA's practice working with the international varieties of English characteristic of many of those texts.

A few suggestions for supplementary activities and exercises are offered in the appendix of this paper. While by no means comprehensive in scope, they are intended to present an idea of the type of exercises needed to complement those examined in the two reading texts. They also provide a basis for additional comments on possible applications to the DA's work through the integration of authentic text materials and tasks.

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APPENDIX: SUPPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES AND EXERCISE TYPES

READING PROBLEM: Intensively reading an entire text when only certain parts of that text are relevant for a task; and spending too much time reading and deciding what to do with documents not clearly identified.

SKILL REQUIRED: Rapid reading, including skimming and scanning to locate specific information.

ACTIVITY A: Predicting and Previewing.

EXERCISE TYPES: -Grellet (pp. 56-57): Having students read a sentence or group of sentences and choose what details will probably come next.

-Grellet (p. 58): Presenting a text with gaps after conjunctions and other linking words; students guess what follows, how the text continues.

-Grellet (p. 58): Using a table of contents, students predict what a book is about. They could also use the preface, introduction, title.

Authentic Texts: Scanning table of contents, title and introduction of reference documentation to quickly identify what type of documentation it is and what it is about.

ACTIVITY B: Skimming.

EXERCISE TYPES: -Grellet (p. 68): Reading a series of paragraphs, and underlining the sentence or key words that sum up the main idea of each paragraph.

-Grellet (p. 73): Finding out what an article is about from reading the beginning of each paragraph.

-Long (Unit 3): Providing a list of questions before a reading passage; students are to read and find the answers to those questions only.

-Authentic Texts: From several memos, finding the one that confirms financing for a particular project; skimming through a project brief to find the information that tells the DA whether or not to open a new file; skimming through several documents to find their identifying characteristics and determine if they are related in any way, e.g., whether all might be part of a set of bidding documents.

ACTIVITY C: Scanning.

EXERCISE TYPES: -Grellet (pp. 84-85): Using want ads to find items. -Grellet (p. 86): Using a schedule of radio programs to find out if a particular type of music is on the schedule anytime that week. -Long (Unit 3): Locating as quickly as possible certain words in columns. -Nuttall (p. 40): With a short article, asking students to determine if it deals with topic x, and if so, where it is mentioned. -Authentic Texts: Scanning through a contract to find who the contracting parties are and when it was signed; scanning a letter to see who signed it, whether action has been taken, and whether it has been initialed for the Information Center; scanning an incoming letter to see if any attachments are mentioned.

READING PROBLEM: Misinterpreting sketchy information communicated by telex; and becoming confused by technical terminology and acronyms.

SKILL REQUIRED: Decoding telegraphic language to reconstruct a message; determining general meaning from context; and determining which details and terminology are essential to meaning and which can be ignored.

ACTIVITY: Determining general meaning from context.

EXERCISE TYPES: -Long (pp. 23-24): Using nonsense words in sentences that clearly demonstrate the general meaning of the sentence, and having students guess what the nonsense words refer to.

-Nuttall (p. 74): Supplying an incomplete text (with blanks) and asking students to answer simple questions on it.

-Nuttall (p. 99): Supplying a text with discourse markers which have been omitted. Several different markers may be presented for students to choose from; students discuss different products gotten by choosing different markers.

-Nuttall (p. 100): Supplying the first couple sentences of a passage, and then leaving only the discourse markers; have students reconstruct different versions of the text.

Authentic Texts: Using cables to practice constructing general meaning from telegraphic language and incomplete texts; using letters or memos with a particularly high density of technical terminology, have students summarize the main idea of the text.

READING PROBLEM: Giving too much importance to any mention of a topic.

SKILL REQUIRED: Determining main topic, purpose and importance of documents.

ACTIVITY: Selective extraction of relevant points from a text.

EXERCISE TYPES: -Grellet (pp. 187-188): Reading a text and filling in a table with the main points about who, what, when, where, why.

-Grellet (pp. 197-198): Comparing several passages on the same subject and then filling in a comparison table: chronology, which is the most factual/dramatic/subjective, contradictions in the stories.

-Grellet (p. 179): Giving information about a court case through various types of documents and texts, and asking students to give a verdict.

-Authentic Texts: Providing selected 1-2 page extracts from various types of documents and reports, and asking DA's to identify their probable source.

READING PROBLEM: Difficulty in organizing and summarizing information.

SKILL REQUIRED: Organizing, paraphrasing and summarizing information from a text or group of texts.

ACTIVITY: Selecting information, organizing it and summarizing it.

EXERCISE TYPES: -Mackay (p. 120): Arranging in order sentences making up a definition which are listed in random order.

-Mackay (pp. 140-141): Reordering sentences into a coherent passage; reordering communicative acts to correspond to the order presented in a text.

-Authentic Texts: Using a bidding invitation, incoming letter and contract to summarize information onto a catalogue card.

READING PROBLEM: Being unable to interpret complex syntactic structures.

SKILL REQUIRED: Ability to decomplexify syntactic structure, breaking phrases and sentences down into their component parts.

ACTIVITY: Analysis of Nominalization.

EXERCISE TYPES: Mackay (p. 181): Writing the corresponding verb form paraphrase of a nominalization.

-Nuttall (p. 87): Identifying underlying propositions of nominalizations.

ACTIVITY B: Analysis of reduced relative clauses.

EXERCISE TYPES: -Mackay (p. 182): Having students supply missing relative pronouns, or conversely, having them delete them from sentences.

ACTIVITY C: Analysis of pronominal reference.

EXERCISE TYPES: -Long: Exercises throughout the text.

-Nuttall (p. 144): Using a cloze exercise to practice only contextual reference.