

SELECTING AN ESL/EFL READING PASSAGE

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The selection of a reading passage is one of the more complex tasks in an intensive reading program. This article explores the nature of this task by positing two categories of factors, those related to the proficiency of the learners in English and those not related to learner proficiency. Also discussed are possible sources of reading passages, including student selection. Finally, I propose that the ESL/EFL reading teacher select passages relating to three or four themes or topics during the reading program, rather than a wide variety of subjects.

ONE OF THE MORE COMPLEX TASKS facing the English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) reading teacher is the selection of appropriate reading passages. The purpose of this article is to explore the nature of this task as it concerns an intensive reading program (in contrast to an extensive reading program) by proposing and discussing two categories of factors which should provide the ESL/EFL reading teacher with some guidelines in selecting a passage to help meet the objectives of the reading lesson. In addition, sources of reading passages are discussed.

The selection of appropriate passages is critical in the teaching of reading. Since the focus of the ESL/EFL reading class should be on some aspect of reading, then the reading passage occupies center stage. Regardless of the reading text used in an ESL/EFL reading program, the reading instructor often finds it necessary to use additional readings as supplements. If the passage chosen is inappropriate for whatever reason, then the chances that the particular lesson has for success may be substantially lessened.

I propose that factors relevant to the selection of a reading passage form two categories: factors which are related to the proficiency of the learners and those which are not. I examine the factors in each category, beginning with those which are related to the proficiency of the learners and then moving to

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those which are not dependent on the learners' linguistic abilities. This is followed by a discussion of possible sources of a reading passage, including student selection. The article concludes with a consideration of whether passages in a reading program should reflect a variety of topics or focus on a particular theme.

PROFICIENCY-RELATED FACTORS

The first category are those factors which depend on the linguistic proficiency of the learners in the target language. That is, the teacher, in examining the reading passage, must take into account the abilities of the learners. Factors included in this category are the following: syntactic appropriateness; logical/rhetorical ordering of ideas; textual phenomena at the discourse level; progression of topics and comments; lexical appropriateness; interest; size of print; and background knowledge of the reader. Carrell (1987a) refers to all but print size and interest as *readability*, while Nuttall (1982) reserves the term only for syntactic and lexical considerations.

Syntactic constructions in a passage affect its readability. The problem lies in measuring the difficulty or comprehensibility of the syntax of a passage. Readability formulas have been employed frequently in first language reading, and less often in foreign or second language reading. Carrell (1987a) provides an insightful summary of such formulas, and concludes that readability formulas fail for a variety of reasons, including a failure to take into account "the interactive nature of the reading process—the interaction of the reader with the text." (Carrell 1987a:32). To this conclusion I would add that ESL/EFL reading teachers often do not have the time, resources, or appropriate information to utilize readability formulas, even if the formulas did do what they are purported to do.

It is my experience in working with ESL/EFL reading teachers that the more effective ones have an accurate grasp of the syntactic knowledge of their students. Generally, such teachers are able to examine a reading passage and broadly determine its degree of syntactic difficulty. They are able to ascertain, for example, if their students understand relative clauses. Such knowledge is critical in selecting a reading passage.

This reinforces one of the major tenets of effective teaching—the more

teachers know about their students, the more effective their teaching is. One way that ESL/EFL reading teachers can become better aware of the linguistic strengths and weaknesses of their learners is to ask them. This could be done as part of a scanning exercise, for example. The learners scan a reading passage and underline syntactic constructions which are new or difficult, or which they do not quickly recognize or understand. The more often this is done, the better the reading teacher's knowledge is of students' linguistic capabilities.

The factors of logical/rhetorical ordering of ideas, textual phenomena at the discourse level, and progression of topics and comments are very similar to syntactic considerations. It is important that the ESL/EFL reading teacher know if her learners can handle the presentations of ideas and arguments in the passage, if the cohesive markers and transition devices are within the linguistic competence of her learners, and if they can follow the line of reasoning utilized by the writer of the passage. To the extent that these factors are within the competence of the learners, then the passage could be considered for use in a reading lesson. The reading teacher should be aware of her students' abilities in these areas. One way of determining this could be through simple identification exercises. Finally, if one of the points of the reading lesson is to teach one of these factors, for example discursial textual phenomena, then it would be important to make sure that the reading passage includes these elements, regardless of the learners' proficiency. Williams (1983) is an excellent article on recognizing cohesive ties in reading in a foreign language.

Another key element of proficiency-related factors is lexical knowledge. There are two issues involved with lexical knowledge. The first concerns how to determine the degree of difficulty of the vocabulary of a reading passage. The second is what number of unknown words is acceptable in a reading passage. The general answer to the first issue is the same as the solution proposed for knowing about student's linguistic capabilities: An effective teacher knows what her students know. To help in developing this knowledge of students' vocabulary, again a scanning exercise is recommended, whereby students identify in some fashion difficult or unknown words in a passage. Over time, this will help a teacher determine the lexical knowledge of her learners.

The second issue, how much new vocabulary should be in a reading

passage, depends at least partially on the type of reading program—extensive or intensive—and also on the objectives of the reading lesson. Nuttall (1982:26) defines new lexical items as words and idioms or compound phrases and recommends that in an intensive reading lesson the percentage of new lexical items be less than three per cent. Nuttall cites the recommendation by Bright and McGregor (1970:80) that the ideal passage has no new words because learners cannot respond completely to unknown items. However, if one of the objectives of the lesson is teach learners to guess the meaning of unknown lexical items from the context, then the passage would have to include some unknown words and phrases. But in general, it is recommended that the number of unknown lexical items be kept to an absolute maximum of no more than one or two words per page. This recommendation is based on the premise that the purpose of the reading lesson is reading, and not vocabulary development.

If the reading passage finally selected does contain new vocabulary items, then the teacher should consider their importance. That is, what value might be attached to their being learned at the learners' stage in the acquisition of the target language? If the teacher believes that the unknown lexical items are not important, then she might consider substituting items the learners already know.

One of the major factors in the category of proficiency-related factors is interest. Nuttall (1982:25) refers to this as *suitability of content*. In considering a reading passage, the teacher should take into account the topic to ensure that it is of interest to the learners. As Carrell (1984:339) states, "First, reading teachers should use materials the students are interested in, including materials self-selected by the student." Again, the only way that this can be determined is to have knowledge of learners' interests. Elsewhere (Day, ms.) I discuss some approaches to learning about student interests, including various types of questionnaires.

I place interest in the proficiency-related category because I believe that this factor is of relatively less importance at the beginning stages of reading development and acquires greater and greater importance as learners become more proficient. In the early stages of learning to read, it may be that the subject matter or material is not as critical as the other proficiency-related factors or the passage's readability. Regardless of the subject matter, at the beginning stages readability is of primary importance. The beginning reader in

a foreign language is more concerned with decoding, with bottom-up processing, so that, generally, the topic is less important. Simple sentences using known syntactic structures and lexical items are crucial.

Interest does become more important as the learner becomes more familiar with the reading processes of English, and begins to move to a more interactive style of reading. At the intermediate level of reading proficiency, the factors of readability and interest should have approximately equal weight in determining the suitability of a reading passage. With more proficient readers, readability often ceases to be a critical factor, and interest becomes primary. If the topic of the text is not of interest to advanced readers, then the motivation to read is substantially lessened, thereby defeating one of the generally accepted aims of a reading program—to help get the learners to read in the target language on their own.

A final consideration under interest expands somewhat this factor. Nuttall (1982:30) recommends that in selecting the passage, the teacher should attempt to discover if the passage will:

- “(i) tell the students things they don’t already know
- (ii) introduce them to new and relevant ideas, make them think about things they haven’t thought about before
- (iii) help them to understand the way other people feel of (e.g., people with different backgrounds, problems or attitudes from their own)
- (iv) make them want to read for themselves (to continue a story, find out more about a subject and so on).”

The final factor in the proficiency-related category is learners’ background knowledge. This is directly related to interest, as it is one of elements used to determine student interest. It is generally true that students know more about topics in which they are interested than those in which they have relatively little interest. It can be determined by the same way that interest is.

Learners’ background knowledge differs somewhat from interest in that it may be an important factor in the selection of a text much earlier in the early stages of reading proficiency. Research (e.g., Alderson and Urquhart 1988; Carrell 1987b; Johnson 1981) has demonstrated that background knowledge plays a key role in the comprehension of a reading passage by intermediate and advanced ESL learners. Thus, given its importance in these two stages, it

might also be a critical factor in the beginning stages.

Finally, the size of the print in the passage may be a factor to be considered for beginning readers. Type somewhat larger than normal might be an aid to learners in the initial stages of reading, as larger type helps in the decoding process. Larger size type is commonly used in beginning readers for first language reading. Too large type, however, might be a detriment to developing a more rapid reading rate, for it would hinder the reader's ability to process chunks of print as the eyes move across the page.

FACTORS NOT RELATED TO LEARNER PROFICIENCY

This category of factors are those that do not depend on the linguistic abilities or proficiency of the learners. I do not wish to claim that these nonproficiency-related factors are either less or more important than those factors which are dependent on the linguistic proficiency of the learners. I only claim that this set of factors is not influenced by the proficiency of students in the target language.

Nonproficiency-related factors useful in selecting a reading text include exploitability (Nuttall 1982), the length of the passage, the ease with which it can be made available to the learners, its cultural and political suitability, the layout of the passage, and presentation of the passage.

Exploitability, which Nuttall (1982:30–31) defines as the facilitation of learning, is one of the key factors in selecting a reading passage. Simply put, will the passage allow you to teach the objectives of your reading lesson? If, for example, you plan to teach inferencing, does the reading passage allow readers to make inferences? Exploitability is a key factor in the selection of a reading passage, for if the passage does not facilitate learning, then the reading lesson cannot be effective.

It is often difficult to gauge the appropriate length of a reading passage. The better the teacher knows the reading abilities of her students, the easier this task becomes. The most common mistake of inexperienced teachers or teachers who are not able to judge the reading abilities of their students is to select a passage which is too long. This results in the students not being able to complete the reading, which means that the reading lesson is not successful. The would-be learners become frustrated and often blame themselves, feeling that they are poor readers. Effective ESL/EFL reading teachers often read the

passage themselves before selecting it, and time how long it takes to read it. Then if the reading passage is used in the reading class, the teacher can compare her time with the time it takes her learners. If this process is done a number of times, then the teacher, based on the time it takes her to read a text, is able to make a fairly accurate prediction of how long it will take her learners to read it.

The factor of the length of a reading passage is related to a number of the proficiency-related factors. While there are some obvious connections, a passage could be appropriate in terms of its syntactic or lexical difficulty, for example, but it could simply be too long to finish in the amount of time available for the activity.

The second nonproficiency-related factor concerns the ease with which it can be made available to the learners. This includes the question of how the passage could be reproduced, used on an overhead projector, or otherwise made available to the learners so that they might use it as a reading passage. Often copyright law has to be considered. If the article can be photocopied or reproduced in some fashion, then the cost of the reproduction must be considered. If the passage is part of a book of readings, then the teacher should consider ordering copies of the book, if other articles are to be used in the reading course or other reading courses in the same school. The availability and cost must be considered, along with the amount of time it would take to get the book.

Another nonproficiency-related factor involves the political suitability of the reading passage. In some countries, the political content of articles is a critical issue, while in others, it is not. Expatriate teachers working in politically sensitive countries should pay particular attention to this quality, particularly if it is not an issue in their home countries.

Cultural suitability may be an equally key factor in the selection of a reading passage. Articles for expatriate teachers which would not raise an eyebrow in their home countries could be culturally explosive when used in other countries.

The final nonproficiency-related factors are concerned with the appearance of the reading passage. The reading teacher might want to examine the potential reading passage to see if its layout might be beneficial or harmful. For example, the teacher might check to see if there are pictures or other nontextual information which might help students in understanding it.

Are the lines or paragraphs numbered? In addition, the teacher could look at the passage's appearance to determine if the passage is legible. This is important if the passage is to be reproduced. A poorly legible article could thwart the objectives of an otherwise excellent reading lesson. Finally, the teacher might care to evaluate the appearance or impression of the passage. If the goal of the reading class is to help the learners become readers of the target language outside of the reading class, then attractive, well-designed passages might be more of an incentive than sloppy, hard-to-read texts.

SOURCES OF ESL/EFL READING PASSAGES

As long as the criteria presented in this article are taken into consideration, the ESL/EFL reading passage may come from just about any source. For the beginning stages, the sources are much more restricted, and may be taken directly from other learning materials in the course of study. For example, if dialogues are used, then a reading passage may be adapted from them. In addition, short paragraphs can be constructed using the vocabulary and structures which the students learned in previous lessons. Since interest is not a factor in the early stages of ESL/EFL reading, the reading passages do not have to be works of literary significance. One of the more controversial issues in ESL/EFL reading is the use of graded readers. Simensen (1987:42) identifies three types of graded readers:

1. **Authentic** — these have authentic or original texts, with no pedagogical purposes
2. **Pedagogic** — texts written expressly for ESL/EFL learners
3. **Adapted** — these are texts which have authentic texts in the original, nonadapted form.

All graded readers are aimed at a particular level by processes which involve considerations of vocabulary, content, and syntax. Hill and Thomas (1988) provide an excellent survey of graded readers. Critics of adapted readers charge that the simplification processes result in material difficult to understand and distorted, often lacking in cohesion and coherence. Honeyfield (1977), for example, points out that these processes of

simplification may result in changes “information structure (the way in which information is distributed in a text), and in communicative structure (the way in which information is organized in a text for particular communicative purposes)” (1977:431). In addition to Honeyfield (1977), Campbell (1987), Simensen (1987) and Widdowson (1979) contain insightful discussions of these issues.

Hafiz and Tudor (1989) describe an experiment which used graded readers, noting that they did not have the option of using authentic reading materials. This was due to the design of the investigation in which the researchers wanted to measure the effects and effectiveness of extensive reading in second language learning. Their results showed beneficial effects of graded readers.

There seems to be general agreement of the usefulness of two types of graded readers, authentic and pedagogic, at the beginning and intermediate stages, but little agreement on the use of adapted readers at any stage. I prefer to take a pragmatic approach to this issue, and am not overly concerned if the reading passage is adapted, just as long as it fulfills the various criteria detailed in this article. If ESL/EFL readers are introduced to classics in adapted form, they just might be inspired, when they are more fluent readers, to try to read the originals.

For the intermediate and advanced readers, the sources of reading passages are more numerous, as readability becomes less and less an issue. Newspapers, journals, magazines, and literary texts are excellent sources of material. In an academic setting, texts used in other courses are particularly relevant. Nuttall (1982:30) advocates choosing passages from many sources to expose the learners to a variety of writing styles and genres. She recommends that passages be selected from material the students might be exposed to later, either in an academic setting or for personal enjoyment.

The final issue to be addressed as a possible source of a reading passage is the selection by the learners themselves of reading passages. Given the current interest in involving the student in the learning process (e.g., Nunan 1988), it might seem appropriate to have students contribute passages they would like to read. It is my recommendation that in an intensive reading program, where the focus is on learning to read critically and for comprehension and on learning the various reading skills and strategies, students should not be involved in selecting reading passages. This

recommendation is based primarily on the selection factor of exploitability, discussed above. Since the students are learning to read, they most likely are not in a position to determine the exploitability of a passage for the objectives of a given reading lesson. If they are able to judge the exploitability, perhaps they might not need the lesson.

For an extensive reading program, where the focus is on reading for personal pleasure, I strongly recommend not only that students select what it is that they read, but that the teachers have relatively little to do with the selection process.

VARIETY VERSUS DEPTH

A final issue to be considered concerns the reading passages which the teacher selects over time, during the reading program or course. For intermediate and advanced learners, teachers may feel that a wide variety of topics would be helpful to maintain student interest and motivation. However, we should consider the merits of what Krashen (1981) calls "narrow reading." He claims that narrow reading, by which he means reading more in depth on a subject, might facilitate second language acquisition, as the vocabulary and structure are often recycled. Certainly having learners read more on a particular subject would facilitate the reading comprehension, as the learners would become familiar with an author's (or authors') style, the vocabulary, the concepts, and the background information important to the topic. Thus, I recommend that, whenever possible, reading teachers use reading passages treating three or four themes or topics during the reading course as an aid in facilitating reading comprehension.

CONCLUSION

A summary of the two categories and the various factors claimed to be important in selecting a reading passage is presented in Table 1. I claim that the importance of the readability factors is crucial in the early stages of the acquisition of reading skills for ESL/EFL learners, and lessens in importance as the learners become more proficient readers.

The size of the print is important for beginning readers in that larger type may be an aid in helping them in the decoding process. Further, the

factor of interest perhaps is of less importance in the beginning stages; it increases in relevance as learners move to intermediate and advanced stages. The role of background knowledge may be a key factor at all levels of ESL/EFL reading proficiency. A number of factors which are not related to the proficiency of the learners are dependent on the context in which the teaching and learning occur. Others are relevant regardless of the situation. The source of the reading passage should not be a problem as long as the factors discussed are taken into consideration. Students should not be involved in the selection of a reading passage, except in an extensive reading program. Finally, it is recommended that reading passages for a course focus on three or four topics or themes, rather than a wide variety of subjects.

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Table 1: Factors Involved in Selecting an ESL/EFL Reading Passage**Factors Related to Learner Proficiency****Readability****Syntactic Appropriateness****Logical/Rhetorical Ordering of Ideas****Discoursal Textual Phenomena****Progression of Topics and Comments****Background Knowledge****Lexical Appropriateness****Print or Type****Interest****Factors Not Related to Learner Proficiency****Exploitability****Ease of Making Available to Learners****Cultural Appropriateness****Political Appropriateness****Appearance****Layout****Presentation**

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