

A PROJECT USING AUTHENTIC MATERIALS  
TO COMPLEMENT A READING COMPREHENSION COURSE

Brian F. De Cheverry

My main purpose in this project is to develop reading comprehension using authentic texts in my E.F.L. intermediate level courses at this institute. At present, the Anglo intermediate department is using Developing Strategies by Brian Abbs for courses 6, and 7, and Studying Strategies at courses 8, 9 and 10. These courses lead to the First Certificate Exam. The reading passages in Developing Strategies are designed to develop the students' reading in the area of scanning for information. The emphasis is on gaining a general understanding of the text as a whole. Then the extracted information is transferred to either oral work or a parallel writing activity. The teacher is encouraged to avoid detailed language study on the text, and is expected to help students draw out and expand the linguistic concept of the particular unit being studied. Here the transfer of practise from the reading passage to role plays or short writing activities emphasizes language usage. Later in the courses following with Studying Strategies more detailed language practise is introduced. Here students are focussed on the use of vocabulary in context through more detailed study of the reading comprehension texts. Now the texts are mostly authentic or unsimplified

for E.L.T. Transfer of the reading to other skill practise remains a guiding principle, but guessing at meaning, anticipation, and inferring of opinions are also included. On the whole the rationale behind the reading segments is sound. The author bases his selection of texts upon the linguistic unity of each chapter, and they deal with relevant topics to expand the language being introduced and practised. The guiding organisational principle is the core of grammatical structures in a hierarchical sequence.

#### CURRENT THEORY

According to Wilga Rivers reading comprehension must be studied in progressive stages. Students should be taught to derive meaning from a text which is within their linguistic abilities. The use of readings which are too high for them is frustrating, and in the end counter-productive. Meaning in reading is divided into three areas:

1. Semantic content of words and expressions in texts.
2. Structural relationships among words and inter-relationships between sentences in context.
3. Socio-cultural meanings of words and expressions in different situations.

Students should be taught word classes such as:

Verbal forms of persons and tenses.

Words to introduce phrases and clauses.

Adverbs showing time, place and manner.

Functions of negation and interrogatives.

Rivers elaborates various stages of reading from the beginner to intermediate and advanced. At stage 4 of the intermediate level students are asked to read extensively at a lower stage of linguistic ability. The main objectives are that reader training has to be structurally controlled and the emphasis is on reading for fluency. One of the main problems at this stage to be avoided is word by word translation. Students are therefore encouraged to read within their own level and thus to gain an appreciation of the foreign culture with the help of the teacher in comprehension.

Jeremy Harmer isolates the importance of student interests and the relative usefulness that a text has for the reader. When we read, we pay more attention to topics that we are interested in and feel are useful to us. Students should be encouraged to identify their own reading purposes and to fulfill their own expectations. In real life we have fundamental reading purposes to do with what we are studying and working at. In the E.F.L. classroom general objectives are modified for teaching purposes. Harmer divides these into two types, type 1 is general reading and type 2 is more detailed. He states that general reading includes making predictions, extracting information, and getting a general picture of the text. Reading for detail includes

making predictions, extracting information, and getting a general picture of the text. Reading for detail includes inferring opinions and attitudes, deducing meaning from context, and recognising function and discourse markers. Type one skills are those which a student performs on a text for the first time to get a general picture of it. Type two skills are those a student uses in detailed study of a text. Students have to be taught that it is within their best interest to tackle words and structures that they have never dealt with. It is true in general that we cannot understand everything at first. Students are best encouraged to read at a slightly higher linguistic level for the sake of progress. In the use of comprehension tests he says that multiple-choice questions are not natural because we don't use multiple options in real life. Because stage 2 reflects the situation where a student returns to a text for more detailed information, he proposes using true-false type questions and open-ended type questions along with the guessing of meaning and new phrases.

In Virginia French Allen's book on vocabulary, she states that intermediate students are often frustrated with their lack of progress because although they have a large amount of reference vocabulary, they face the problem of harder vocabulary which can only be explained through

logic and sense relations. Students are more motivated when they use a new word for communication. She prefers this type of learning to giving a definition or a synonym, because it seems better for students to compose simple sentences of clear examples and to group words into lexically related categories than to memorise definitions. She goes on to say that the vocabulary being acquired through reading should be related to the lives of English speaking people. This will help students to go beyond their own experience and learn from the social meanings of words. More advanced students should be encouraged to become self responsible for their own learning. Thus becoming more accustomed to defining words according to their usage. She gives 3 steps for the guessing of an unknown word:

1. Think carefully about the entire sentence.
2. Look at the word and identify what kind it is, noun, verb etc.
3. Think of the possible meaning before looking it up in a dictionary.

Students can then make wise choices from among the listed possibilities in multiple-choice type questions. Here she disagrees with Harmer over the usefulness of multiple-choice questions. When learning the meaning of words from the context of a reading text, students who reach a higher level of difficulty need to be guided towards

intelligent guessing, and a dictionary may not always give the exact social meaning of a particular word found in a particular text. Harmer agrees on the usefulness of guessing from context, but Allen's approach seems to be better.

In an article published in the Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics, H. G. Widdowson establishes four question types for reading comprehension. One, those of direct reference, which refer to a specific part of a passage. Two, those of contextual inference where the relationships between parts of the text are asked about. Three, those of supposition where the situation generally helps the reader to understand what is implied. Four, those of evaluation of style, attitude, tone and literary significance.

Francoise Grellet in her book Developing REading Skills states that until recently reading comprehension exercises concentrated upon units smaller than the sentence, but that if students are to be taught to read efficiently, larger units such as the paragraph or the whole text must be understood. This global approach helps build up students confidence and the awareness of how texts are organised, will allow students to read more efficiently later on. By starting with longer units students are encouraged to anticipate what they will later find in a text. This is



essential in order to develop the skill of inference, anticipation and deduction. The reading of a text is seen as a constant process of guessing and what a student brings to a text more than what he gets from it. She further recommends using authentic texts because the process of simplifying results in increasing difficulty, because the system of references, redundancies and discourse markers are often removed and altered.

#### GENERAL PROCEDURE

The problem of finding suitable and varied texts is solved by using local and international publications.\* I found a wide variety of texts which I developed reading comprehension exercises for from Time, Newsweek, The News, The Manchester Guardian, and British Council Publications. The advantage of local news is that it talks about what is relevant and of interest to my students. Here my main difficulty was one of grading the material for the various intermediate levels. Authentic texts have not been graded or simplified for the E.L.T. classroom. I chose to adapt the kinds of questions along general lines. Beginners can get general questions referring to the introductions, titles, introductions and conclusions. They can scan for salient facts and figures. More advanced students can locate more detailed information and guess at the meaning of culture-bound vocabulary.\*\* I feel that it is occasionally

good for intermediate students to deal with more complex texts, occasionally! Writers often expect readers to have a certain background knowledge. This reflect is the use of specialised vocabulary, unexplained references, elliptical structures, and word play or connotations. Often a popularised version of a text in a newspaper or magazine will be easier than a specialised one. Although this is generally true, international magazines such as Time and Newsweek have a constant reference to things American or British.\*\* This difficulty I tried to take into account when selecting the texts I used. When a student has the required background knowledge there will be fewer problems with the comprehension of the text. In formulating the questions I used Widowson's first three types. When designing the questions on vocabulary I followed Virginia French Allen's suggestion for guiding the understanding.

After each text was developed I used them in my courses 6-10 over a period of two semesters. They provided supplementary reading comprehension material. My students answers were collected and I analysed them using the procedures of facility index and index of discrimination as laid down by J.B. Heaton in Writing English Language Tests. The facility value of the index of difficulty is

\* Williams, Ray ref. 16

\*\* Maingay Susan M. ref. 12



expressed as a fraction of the students who answered a set item correctly. The discrimination index indicates how well an item discriminates between testees. This tells us whether those students who tended to do well on the whole test did well or badly on a particular item of the test. The good achievers of upper students tend to perform well on the test as a whole and the poor or lower students tend to do badly. Thus a particular item becomes a criterion measure and is successful if it distinguishes between good and poor students. When an item distinguished poorly I performed an extended item analysis on it to see how the distractors were functioning. If there was implied ambiguity I suggested possible changes to the multiple choice question. This analysis applies only to those questions where multiple choice was used. As well as these two criteria for evaluation I also used the mean and standard deviation to check the range of success of the student on the reading comprehension tests. Some questions were either too easy, everyone answering correctly, or too difficult, everyone misunderstanding. In these cases I decided to change or modify the question entirely.

THE ADVENTURES OF THE LITERARY INNKEEPER

I had a sliemn time travelling north that day, It was fine May weather, with the hewthorn flowering on every hedge, and I asked myself why, when I was still a free man, I had stayed on in London and not got the good of this heavenly country, I didn't dare face the restaurant car, but I got a luncheon-basket at Leeds and shared it with the fat woman. Also I got the morning's papers, with news about starters for the Derby and the beginning of the cricket season, and some paragraphs about how Balkan affairs were settling down and a British squadron was going to Kiel.

When I had done with them I got out Scudder's little black pocket-book and studied it. It was pretty well filled with jottings, chiefly figures, though now and then a name was printed in, for example, I found the words "Hofgaard", "Luneville", and "Avocado" pretty often, and specially the word "Pavia".

Now I was certain that Scudder never did anything without a reason, and I was pretty sure that there was a cypher in all this, that is a subject which has always interested me, and I did a bit at it myself once as intelligence-officer in Delgoa Bay during the Boer War. I have a head for things like chess and puzzles, and I used to reckon myself pretty good at finding out cyphers. This one looked like the numerical kind where sets of

figures correspond to the letters of the alphabet, but any fairly shrewd man can find the clue to sort after an hour or two's work, and I didn't think Scudder would have been content with anything so easy, so I fastened on the printed words, for you can make a pretty good numerical cypher if you have a Key word which gives you the sequence of the letters.

I fit these expressions from the Text into the following.

solemn	hawthorn
for starters	jottings
cypher	head for
shrewd	clue
reckon	fasten on

1. The writing on the paper was really only incomplete \_\_\_\_\_
2. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a nice country flower.
3. At first he thought to relax \_\_\_\_\_
4. The mysterious message was a \_\_\_\_\_
5. It was a quiet, \_\_\_\_\_ morning.
6. The boy could \_\_\_\_\_ that he was right.
7. An intelligent person has a \_\_\_\_\_ numbers
8. The girl was \_\_\_\_\_ to stay and pick flowers.
9. The window could be \_\_\_\_\_ a hook.
10. The clever boy made a \_\_\_\_\_ guess at the meaning of the message.

#### IV. Answer

1. Why was the man still free,
2. What does "Them" refer to in "when I had done with them"?
3. How had the man obtained the book,
4. What is "it" in "I did a bit at it"?

The Adventures of the Literary Inkeeper

Item	upper	lower	U	& L	F.V.	U-L	DISCR.
1.	1	4		5	.63	-3	-.75
2.	4	3		7	.88	1	.25
3.	4	0		4	.50	4	100
4.	4	2		6	.75	2	.50
5.	4	4		8	100	0	0
6.	3	3		6	.75	0	0
7.	3	0		3	.38	3	.75
8.	2	1		3	.38	1	.25
9.	2	1		3	.38	1	.25
10.	3	2		5	.63	1	.25

This is a literary passage taken from the 39 Steps by John Buchan. I used it at a course ten level because of the vocabulary. Question I worked negatively because the word jottings was misunderstood. I wouldn't change the vocabulary but would allow repetitions. The second part of the exam was difficult because the questions are not explicit and require answering by supposition. I would change the questions:

1. How do you know that the man is relaxing and free,
2. How do you know that the book is a secret code?

On the whole the exam worked well at this level.