

Towards a More Communicative Reading Course: Motivating Students who are not "Reading Addicts"

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Many educated people (including most EFL teachers) are "reading addicts", and this tends to colour their view of what motivates other readers. In consequence, reading courses may easily fail to motivate non-addicts. Many published courses show a number of common faults in this respect: the text is not read for any direct purpose, even in ESP courses, and so cannot be said to be truly communicative. And texts are selected to cover a wide variety of topics in the hope that this will reduce boredom and that at least some of them may be relevant to students' interests. But this reduces the chance of lexis being recycled from text to text, and so reinforcement and the motivational spur of tangible progress are lost. Furthermore, texts are done to death by multiple exercises.

An alternative type of reading course is proposed which attempts to overcome these problems. It also takes note of some of the preconditions necessary for comprehension, an area which has been paid little more than lip service in many reading courses.

INTRODUCTION

"To a considerable extent reading has become, for almost all of us, an addiction, like cigarette smoking. We read, most of the time, not because we wish to instruct ourselves, not because we long to have our feelings touched or our imaginations fired, but because reading is one of our bad habits, because we suffer when we have time to spare and no printed matter with which to plug the void. Deprived of their newspapers or a novel, reading addicts will fall back on cookery books, on the literature that is wrapped round bottles of patent medicine, on those instructions for keeping the contents crisp which are printed on the outside of boxes of breakfast cereals. On anything." (Aldous Huxley: 1936)

I am sure all EFL teachers will recognise something of themselves in the passage above. In fact, among many educated people the addiction is so widespread that it is taken as normal. Our idle curiosity is almost limitless. Few of us have not spent time while waiting for a train or to see the doctor, reading articles in the business news on the price fluctuations of the soya bean complex or other matters of equal irrelevance to our daily lives. This capacity to prefer reading *anything* to not reading tends to colour our decisions when choosing texts for reading courses. We tend to assume that our students have the same omnivorous reading habit as ourselves: that what interests us will interest them. If the students come from a similar cultural background to our own and have through education reached a similar level of addiction, then we may not be far wrong; but all EFL teachers must also be familiar with students who find all the "general interest" readings they are presented with equally boring. In many cultures the reading addict is rare and people take a far more pragmatic view of reading, only reading when it is necessary for them to obtain information from a text.

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The origins of reading addiction may lie in some lack of ability to be at ease with ourselves, so that we constantly need the distraction of some form of external stimulus; or perhaps the reading material forms a substitute for the social communication which our society lacks. Whatever its origins, the addiction seems much less widespread in the Middle East, where people seem to spend more time talking to each other and to have the ability to be content during periods of inactivity without the need for external stimulus. Our students at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah probably read a great deal more than the average Saudi Arabian, but their reading is still very limited by the standards of the addict. Even more important, it is highly specific. Students read very little in Arabic or English which they have not been instructed to read as part of their course. Their reading often seems to be confined to those set texts which they know they will be tested on. Thus, the tendency is to read intensively, virtually learning a key text, rather than reading extensively to gain a broad understanding of the subject. Their pleasure reading is often limited to the sports page of the occasional newspaper. With such students, the assumptions about motivation which underly a typical reading course are unlikely to be correct.

PROBLEMS WITH PUBLISHED READING COURSES

Most published courses, even those ESP courses designed to meet the needs of students of particular academic disciplines, seem to be designed to motivate the omnivorous reading addict rather than the type of student I have described. There are a number of reasons why such courses may fail to motivate our students. Firstly, the texts are not read for any direct purpose. This is true even for ESP courses. Students who do little background reading in their subject area, even in their own language, are unlikely to see much point in reading a text in English which, while broadly relevant to the subject they are studying, does not give them information which will help them to pass their next examination. The long-term objective of reading English text to improve their language ability is too remote to be of much motivational value. The texts in many published reading courses cannot be said to be truly communicative because they are read for reasons which have little to do with their content, and the students would be unlikely to read them if left to their own devices. The likelihood of an ESP text being truly communicative is often further reduced by the deliberate choice of texts which tell the students nothing they do not already know. The idea behind this is to eliminate conceptual difficulties so that the student can give his whole attention to the language of the text. In extreme cases the result can be that the student does not bother to read the text, which has nothing to tell him, but goes straight to the comprehension questions, which he answers quite accurately from his previous knowledge. The teacher then tells the student that he must answer the questions by reference to the text; but what motivation is there for him to refer to a text to find information which he already knows? Such texts can only be used as linguistic exercises to provide examples of grammatical structures and rhetorical conventions; and while this can be valuable, the text cannot be regarded as an example of communicative language.

A second problem is that in an effort to make a published course stimulating to as wide a range of students as possible, a wide range of topics is often chosen for the texts. It is hoped that in this way every student will find something in the course directly relevant to his own interests. However, the corollary may be more significant: most students being disinterested in most of the texts because they have no direct relevance to their

needs. This approach to course design is also unsatisfactory in terms of teaching efficiency, as the constant shift of topic area makes it less likely that the lexis and structures found in any one text will appear again during the course. Thus there is likely to be little reinforcement.

Finding suitable texts is not easy, and so there is a tendency for the course designer to try to get the most out of those texts which he does find. The texts are subjected to exhaustive analysis, and questions are designed to make the student aware of every nuance of meaning (or more likely, make him aware that he was not aware). By the time the class has finished with it, the text is like the remains of a dissection: something dead and repulsive. The class then moves on to repeat the process with another isolated chunk of language. As well as being demoralising, this process may encourage reading habits which are to the student's disadvantage when he comes to use his English reading skills for the purpose for which they were intended, i.e. reading textbooks and articles related to his main subject. Here, an exhaustive understanding of the text is generally not necessary: the student only needs to be able to follow the main arguments and understand the key facts. As mentioned above, most of our students have developed a habit of intensive reading. When reading in English, they automatically stop every time they come to a new or unfamiliar word and reach for the English-Arabic dictionary. The translation (often inappropriate) is then written into the text. This often results in a word by word translation into a garbled back-to-front Arabic version of the text. An earlier paper (Mustafa, Nelson and Thomas 1984) showed that there was an inverse correlation between the number of Arabic words that a student wrote on his examination text, and his final score in that examination. We are at present trying to find out to what extent this is the result of poor students translating more than good students, and to what extent it is the result of translation actually interfering with the comprehension process.

PLANNING A READING COURSE FOR EARTH SCIENCE STUDENTS

When it became necessary to design a new reading course for first year students in the Faculty of Earth Sciences at King Abdulaziz University, we were acutely aware of the negative aspects referred to above in most existing courses, not least because they were present in materials which had already been produced in our department. In designing the new course, we attempted to avoid those features of existing courses which diminished their suitability for our students. We were not at all sure how our students improved their ability to read English, but it seemed likely that they learned to read by reading; or to qualify that a little, they improved their reading ability by reading and understanding. Thus the more they read the better, and so the motivation for reading became of central importance.

It was also apparent, as has been stated many times before, that "a major determinant of a text's comprehensibility is the goodness of the match between the knowledge the author has presumed of the reader and that actually possessed by the reader" (Adams and Bruce 1982): what a reader understands from a text is a function of the interaction of the text with the knowledge which the reader brings to it. An overzealous application of this principle in the selection of texts can result in the situation mentioned earlier where the text tells the reader nothing he did not already know. But the principle still stands. This gave us the problem of assessing how much the students already knew about Earth Science. We found that we could not assume much

background knowledge, as they had not learnt much about the subject at school and were very new to the faculty.

Text selection proved difficult. A search through textbooks on the earth sciences showed that those texts written for students with little knowledge of the subject made considerable use of analogy in their explanations. These analogies are obviously very valuable for the native speaker, but they generally only serve to confuse the issue for the foreign language learner. This may be due to limited vocabulary, e.g. "A lava flow moves slowly, rather like molasses." (Shepherd 1968). Once the student understood the word *molasses* he might grasp the idea, but *molasses* is hardly a useful addition to his earth science vocabulary. More seriously, an analogy may refer to matters outside the experience of most Saudi Arabian students, e.g. "Just as you may squeeze a snowball so hard that it changes into a kind of ice in your hand so the bottom layers of snow on a mountain may change into ice under the thick layers of snow above them." (Shepherd 1968) Another problem with the lower level texts was that they often oversimplified the subject-matter, and in some cases they were inaccurate. The more advanced texts generally assumed rather too much prior knowledge, and usually went into too much detail with a multiplicity of examples and a high density of technical vocabulary. It gradually became apparent that there would be considerable advantages in writing texts specially for the course.

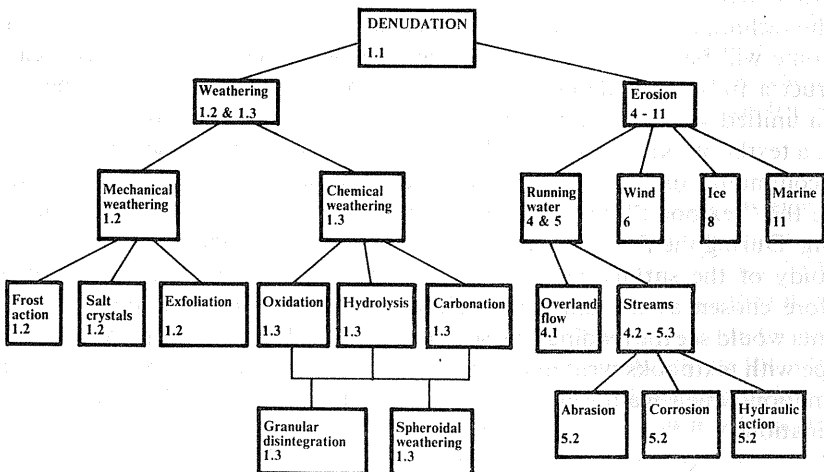
One obvious advantage of writing texts specially for the course was that in this way we would be able to control the level of difficulty of the texts both in linguistic and conceptual terms. In the English Language Centre there is a general reluctance to use specially written texts. It is felt that all texts used should be "authentic", and the idea has become established that a text can only be authentic if it has been taken from a textbook written for English-speaking students of the subject. I was in a rather fortunate position in that my degree and initial teaching experience were in geology and geography. So I felt reasonably competent to write texts for the course which were both "authentic" in the sense of being written by a subject specialist concerned with communicating the concepts of the subject, and yet were also not too difficult in linguistic terms for our students.

Once the decision to write texts specifically for the course had been made, it became clear that there were other advantages in this approach. Instead of adopting the shotgun technique mentioned above - where a variety of topics are chosen in the hope that some will be of interest - it became possible to select one subject area and so construct a fully integrated course with each reading combining with the others to form a unified whole. Because the readings would combine in this way to form, in effect, a textbook on one subject, they would represent a far closer approximation to truly communicative language than is normally achieved in a reading course. Of course the "textbook" had to be one which the students would see some point in reading. During the first semester in the Faculty of Earth Sciences the emphasis is on the study of the surface features of the earth. A course on geomorphology was therefore chosen as the unifying subject area of the texts. The hope was that the students would see the reading course as having a double value: improving their ability to cope with textbooks written in English, while simultaneously providing them with information which would be of direct value in getting them through their Faculty examinations.

As well as improving overall motivation in this way, there were a number of other motivational and pedagogical advantages in this type of course design. Because of the single theme linking all the readings, lexis and structures from the early units of the course would be naturally recycled in later units. This would aid learning by providing reinforcement, and would also act as a motivational spur in that students would see evidence that progress was being made when newly-familiar words recurred. Their newly-acquired knowledge would have some immediate application instead of being left dormant until some unspecified future date when, by chance, they found themselves reading another text on a subject featured in their English course.

Many writers have stressed the importance of prior knowledge as a factor in reading comprehension. Comprehension is seen as the result of the interaction of the text with the reader's background knowledge to develop or extend schemata (e.g. Rumelhart 1981, Carrell 1983). Reading research has demonstrated that a mismatch between the reader's schema and the schema of the writer can lead either to a breakdown in comprehension or a revision of the reader's schema towards that of the author. An advantage of a fully integrated reading course would be that as the course progressed, so the prior knowledge which the student brings to each reading would increase, because concepts gained from the early readings would be of value in understanding the later ones. Also as the course progressed, the students would construct increasingly complex schemata into which information from the later texts could be slotted. Full comprehension would thus be much more likely to occur. Throughout the course, moreover, a conscious effort could be made to facilitate and accelerate the formation of students' schemata by questioning the students about earlier readings and using their answers to construct flowcharts and diagrams summarising the information which they already have, and demonstrating how information from the latest text fits in with their previously-acquired information. (See Langer 1982.) Fig. 1, for example, demonstrates the use of a tree-diagram (incomplete) for purposes of helping students to identify the inter-relationship of information in successive reading passages. (For teaching purposes, of course, many of the boxes are left blank, for students to complete.) The numbers refer to Units and their constituent texts.

Fig. 1 Teaching Materials to Inter-relate Information in Reading Texts



WRITING THE COURSE

The overall objectives of the course can be summarised as follows:

1. To improve the students' ability to read texts related to their main subject of study - geology.
2. To give a purpose to students' reading in their English classes.
3. To increase the quantity of text read during the reading course.
4. To develop the students' ability to work with and interpret diagrams and other illustrations.

The course was planned as a series of twelve units, each consisting of three texts, viz.

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| 1.1 | Geomorphology | 7.1 | Desertification |
| .2 | Weathering | .2 | Weathering in Deserts |
| .3 | Chemical Weathering | .3 | Water in Deserts |
| 2.1 | The Madison Slide | 8.1 | Glaciers |
| .2 | Mass-wasting | .2 | Glacial Erosion |
| .3 | Ice in the Soil | .3 | Glacial Deposition |
| 3.1 | The Hydrologic Cycle | 9.1 | Glaciation |
| .2 | Ground Water | .2 | Ice Ages |
| .3 | Aquifers and Artesian Wells | .3 | Causes of Ice Ages |
| 4.1 | Overland Flow | 10.1 | Coastal Erosion |
| .2 | Streams | .2 | Coastal Deposition |
| .3 | Drainage Systems | .3 | Coral Reefs |
| 5.1 | The Grand Canyon | 11.1 | The Sea |
| .2 | The Work of Streams | .2 | Marine Deposits |
| .3 | Braided Channels and Meanders | .3 | Turbidity Currents |
| 6.1 | Deserts | 12.1 | Krakatoa |
| .2 | Wind Action in Deserts | .2 | Types of Volcano |
| .3 | Sand Dunes | .3 | Distribution of Volcanoes |

The original intention was to treat one topic per unit; but in practice it was found necessary to extend some topics over two units, either because they were of particular relevance (e.g. desert morphology), or because they were too large and too important to be confined to one unit without distortion (e.g. streams).

In general, the three texts in each unit are used in different ways. One reason for this was to maintain the students' interest in the text by not overexploiting it. But we also thought that it was important to encourage students to adopt a more irreverent attitude towards the text, and to treat it as something to be exploited for the information it contains and then cast aside, rather than something to be studied in detail until it is virtually learnt in full. Thus the first text in each unit is to be read for gist - to help students develop strategies for recovering the text's skeletal message. The second text is exploited more fully, and the third is used for skimming and scanning exercises. (In practice, it was not possible to stick to this pattern completely, as some texts did not lend themselves to the intended approach.) The following text (2.1) and its accompanying task illustrate one way of helping students read for gist:

THE MADISON SLIDE

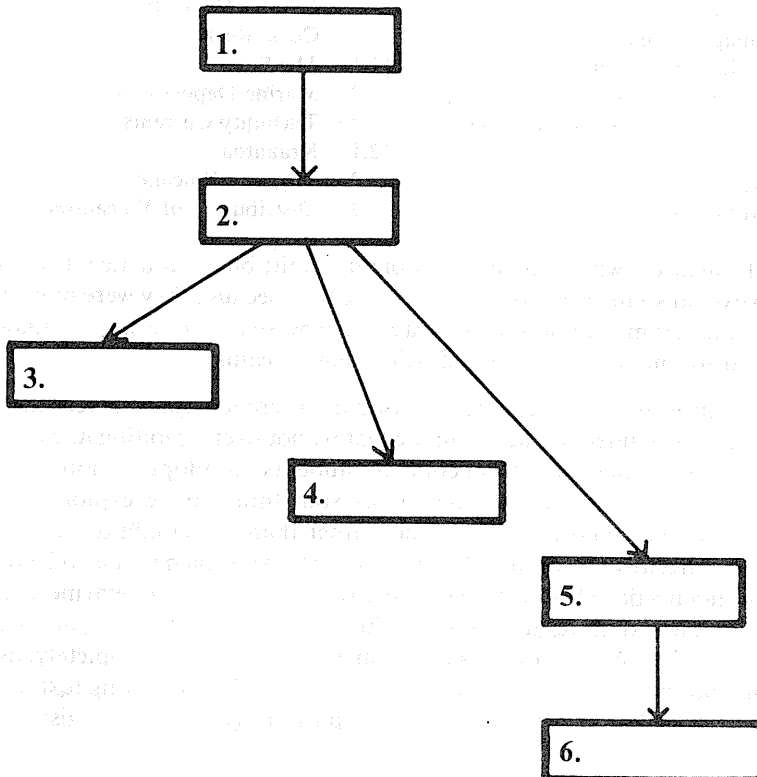
On August 17, 1959 about 200 people were on holiday camping beside the Madison River in the Yellowstone Park in the U.S.A. At 11.37 pm an earthquake of a magnitude of 7.1 on the Richter scale struck the valley. Because the people were sleeping in tents nobody was hurt by the earthquake. However, the earthquake caused a *landslide*. About 28,000,000 cubic metres of rock, a mass about 300 metres in height and 600 metres long, moved down into the valley at a speed of about 150 kilometres per hour. Many people were buried under this great mass of rock.

This huge movement of rock also produced a tremendous wind which blew down trees and swept away tents and cars, killing many more people.

As the landslide hit the river it caused a great flood of water to rush up and down the valley. Many of the people who had survived the landslide and the wind were killed in this flood. The landslide also dammed the river so that now there is a large lake upstream from the site of the landslide.

Landslides are the most spectacular examples of a process which geomorphologists call *mass-wasting*. This section of your course will teach you more about the various forms of the mass-wasting process.

Read the text *The Madison Slide* and then put the following words in the correct boxes in the diagram: lake, landslide, wind, earthquake, dam, flood.



The level of linguistic difficulty of the texts was obviously very difficult to control. It was decided to use an intuitive assessment of difficulty rather than to write within a previously defined lexical and structural set. But an attempt was made to grade the readings within the course, in that individual readings got longer and more linguistically complex towards the end. This was necessary as a preparation for the second semester reading materials which follow a different pattern, using extracts from various British GCE 'O' and 'A' level geology texts. The work of writing the course was shared by two teachers, David Saunders and myself. I wrote the texts and David wrote the accompanying exercises and produced the illustrations.

CONCLUSIONS

The course has now been used for two full semesters, long enough for some impressions of its effectiveness to have been formed. In terms of motivation it has been a qualified success. Students do seem to have been more interested in the materials, but this obviously does not apply to all the students and it is impossible to know if it is not simply the result of the teachers themselves having more faith in what they are doing.

Perhaps the most successful aspect of the course has been the technique of leading students to identify the inter-relationship of information in different texts, by means of various types of schematic representation. This, I would suggest, is an important aspect of real reading (i.e. outside the reading class), but is rarely possible in published FL reading courses. The reason is simply that the author and the publisher, for the book to be financially viable, need to reach as wide a market as possible. This in turn means that the texts in that book need to be varied in topic, with the result that the inter-relationship of information in those texts is not possible, except accidentally. For an FL reading course to represent the organizational reality of a specialist-subject textbook - particularly if it is to parallel the sequence of information in that specialised book - then the FL reading course needs to be purpose-written. But to provide for authenticity, texts should be written by a specialist in the field concerned. In many teaching situations, in fact, much more assistance in writing texts (or in editing such texts already written by the FL teacher of reading) might profitably be sought - if not from an FL teacher with a background in the specialist subject concerned, then from a colleague in the specialist department, or from a professional working in a local Company.

In one area the course has so far failed almost completely. Very little progress has been made in encouraging the students to adopt a more casual attitude towards text. They remain very dissatisfied if a text is abandoned before they have understood every word, feeling that the teacher has cheated them in some way by not finishing the job. If the text is not analysed exhaustively in the classroom, the keener students take it home and subject it to the standard dictionary-translation approach. One semester seems too short a period to break them of this habit, firmly established during their school careers. There are signs of a more relaxed attitude developing in students who have completed the second semester English course, which adopts a very different although in some ways complementary approach (see Mustafa, Nelson and Thomas 1984). It may well therefore be that the earth sciences course is laying a good foundation in this respect.

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