Beginning to Read Forever: a position paper

Brian Tomlinson
National University of Singapore

This position paper argues that extensive reading is the most profitable way of continuing to acquire an L2 outside and after a language course. It also suggests that many L2 learners miss the opportunity because for them reading is a negative experience which provides little enjoyment or success. They establish a habit of slow, studious, textbound reading at beginners' level and this habit persists through the levels of increased proficiency. In their L1 many of them typically read experientially unless a problem or task requires a more studious approach. But in the L2 they typically concentrate on the decoding of words in an attempt to achieve total comprehension.

The paper offers a description of the proficient reading process and the typical L2 learner reading process and suggests a reading programme which aims to help L2 learners to become successful readers by encouraging them to follow from the beginning a reading process as close as possible to the one they use in their L1 as a result of establishing experiential reading as their L2 norm and sufficient understanding as their reading goal.

INTRODUCTION

Most L2 learners spend very little time actually learning the language and many of them do so only in class time. Many have little contact with the L2 outside the classroom and after their course. However, all of them could achieve sustained contact with the language if they had access to books, magazines and newspapers in the language and the ability and inclination to read them. Their ability to read in the L2 could increase with the amount of reading willingly undertaken and the quality and quantity of this reading experience could have a significant effect on their continuing language acquisition. Many researchers and teachers have attested to this power of extensive reading. For example, Krashen found that “the amount of free reading consistently correlates with performance on reading comprehension tests” (1988: 29). He claims that such reading is a source of comprehensible input which can stimulate language acquisition (1991: 409) and he has argued for the potential power of free reading by describing his and other people's research (Krashen, 1993). Some researchers (e.g. Horst et al., 1998) have demonstrated that learners gain very little vocabulary from each extensive reader but Prowse (1999) has questioned their methodology and Tomlinson (1998d) has put forward the theory that lexical readiness facilitates extensive reading. Other researchers who have put forward powerful arguments for extensive reading programmes include Elley (1984; 1991), Hafiz & Tudor (1989), Robb & Susser (1989), Davis (1995), Masuhara et al.

Brian Tomlinson is a Senior Fellow at the National University of Singapore and President of MATSDA, the international materials development association which he founded in 1993. He has worked as a teacher trainer or curriculum developer in Nigeria, Zambia, Vanuatu, Indonesia, Japan and the UK, has given presentations in over forty countries, and has published numerous articles and books, including: Discover English, Openings, Superbird and Materials Development in Language Teaching.
The obvious question is, if free reading can be so valuable to the L2 learner, why do so few learners read extensively outside the classroom and after their course? It seems that the main reason for many of them is that reading is an unsuccessful and unpleasant experience. They have little confidence in their L2 reading ability and see no reason why they should willingly subject themselves to a potentially negative experience. This was the case with the five Korean women in a study by Kim and Krashen (1997). They were all “dedicated readers in their primary language” but had not considered reading as a means of developing their second language ability” (Kim and Krashen 1997:26). They are typical of the many L2 learners who have been made to read linguistically: i.e. to process a text uni-dimensionally through the verbal code rather than to represent it multi-dimensionally through verbal, sensory and affective codes (Masuhara, 1998). They read in one way in their L1 and succeed; but they read in a different way in the L2 and fail. As Auerbach and Paxton (1997: 238-39) say, “many... ESL learners... feel they have to know all the words in a text in order to understand it” and are “unable to transfer positive L1 reading strategies or positive feelings about reading”.

A SUGGESTED MODEL OF PROFICIENT READING

Experiential Reading

In the L1 much of our reading is experiential. That is, we read more or less continuously without paying much conscious attention to the content or expression of the text nor to the application of the reading strategies in our repertoire. We read holistically in order to gain a global understanding of the text rather than analytically in order to gain understanding of each discrete portion of the text. Sometimes though, we need to read studiously, that is with conscious effort and attention. We do this, for example, when reading an instruction leaflet for operating a machine or when studying for examinations. Efficient readers are able to operate at any point on a cline from totally experiential (e.g. reading a letter from a close friend) to totally studious (e.g. studying a legal document). Such readers follow the fundamental principle of economy by only investing the effort and attention required to get what they want from a particular text; and therefore they vary their manner of reading appropriately.

The Fundamentals of Experiential Reading

When we read experientially we automatically activate fundamentals. These are mental operations which are fundamental to the experiential reading process and which consist of goals and of instruments which are used to achieve them.

The Goals of Experiential Reading

1. Comprehension

This involves the understanding of the propositional force of a text both locally and globally, that is the understanding of the literal or public meaning of the words, sentences and paragraphs in the text.

2. Connection

A text can only be really understood if the reader connects each part of the text to the other parts and all the parts to the whole (Grellet, 1981:15-16, 42-53; Pearson and Campbell, 1994), connects the text to prior experience of other texts (Beach, Appleman and Dorsey, 1994) and connects the text to their prior experience of life. The writer is influential in suggesting connections but it is the reader who is responsible for achieving them.

3. Evaluation

This involves the sub-conscious determination of attitudes towards the content and expression of the text being read. The attitudes relate to the perceived value, impact, relevance and effectiveness of the text.

4. Response

This determines the readers' mental reaction to what they are reading. Responses varying along a cline from effrarent to aesthetic, that is from responding only to the public meaning of the words in order to gain useful information to engaging with the text so personally and deeply as to "live through" the event of reading the text (Rosenblatt, 1994).

The goals are not discrete operations nor are they only final products of the experiential reading process. They all operate from the very beginning of the reading of a text and they overlap and interact with each other in order to create mental representations of the text. An important point is that they are not metacognitive skills but sub-conscious processes which operate automatically in proficient experiential reading.

The Instruments of Experiential Reading

The following instruments are sub-conscious processes which are used automatically to achieve the goals. They are all used in varying degrees during the experiential reading of a text and they all contribute to the achievement of each of the goals. They operate simultaneously and in parallel and they also interact with each other.

Decoding

This involves recognizing and attributing meaning to linguistic items such as morphemes, words, phrases and clauses. In L1 proficient experiential reading this is an automatic process which does not demand much processing energy.
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Visualising
In a number of experiments 95% of proficient readers have reported visual imaging whilst reading (see for example, Stevick, 1986 and Tomlinson, 1996, 1997, 1998b). It seems that not all visualisers achieve the same vividness and effect and that they can be placed on a cline from very low imagers to very high (Ernest, 1977; Denis, 1982). But it does seem that visualisation plays a prominent role in helping readers to achieve a mental representation of a text (Sadoski and Paivio, 1994), that it helps readers to fill in the gaps left by the writer (Iser 1978: 141, 185) and that it has a positive effect on comprehension and recall (Anderson & Kuhlmeier, 1972; Kulhavy & Swenson, 1975; Knight, Padron & Waxman, 1985).

Using the Inner Voice
Many neuroscientists claim that the mental repetition of text is normal and essential in L1 reading. For example, Geschwind (1979: 109) says that, “It seems that the comprehension of written words requires the auditory form of the word be evoked in Wernicke’s area.” Many psycholinguists also assert its importance in the reading process. For example, Gathercole and Baddeley (1993) refer to the process as the “phonological loop” and consider it to be particularly important in the comprehension of long and syntactically complex sentences. And Sokolov (1972: especially 78-88) claims it is vital for successful silent reading.

It seems also that most proficient readers use their inner voice to talk to themselves about what they are reading (Tomlinson, in press a, in press b). For example, they try to work out what is going on in the text (e.g. “Why’s she doing that?”), they express feelings towards characters (e.g. “Poor guy.”) and they question and challenge the author (e.g. For example?).

Inferencing
Filling in the blanks left in the text by the author is an important part of the proficient reading process (e.g. Grellet, 1981; Nuttall, 1996). Writers do not typically make everything in their text explicit, both in the interests of economy and to ensure active involvement by the reader; and they rely on readers filling in the gaps from their own experience.

Hypothesising
Usually when we read we make guesses about what is going to come later in the text. This process of prediction is usually referred to as hypothesising and is considered to be an important feature of the reading process (e.g. Grellet 1981: 17-18, 56-67; Alderson, 1984; Nuttall, 1996: 12-16, 118-21).

Persisting
Most of the time proficient readers keep going when reading a text. They do not worry too much if something is not completely clear, they are willing to accept vagueness (Labov, 1973: 352-3), they “typically ignore rather than guess unknown lexis” (Williams and Moran, 1989), they skip sections which are tedious or too demanding and they are confident enough in their own abilities to assume that they will eventually get what they want out of the text. One exception is when they want to sort out a problem and decide to go back and re-read something carefully. Another is when they decide that the text is not worth reading and they abandon it altogether.

In many books on the teaching of reading (e.g. Aebersold and Field, 1997; Nuttall, 1996) some of the above instruments are listed as strategies to be taught to the learners for conscious use when reading. My position is that, in order to become successful experiential readers, learners need to be able to use all the above instruments sub-consciously.

Studial Reading
Proficient readers read in a studial way when they know that the text or the purpose for reading it require the paying of conscious attention. They also do so when they encounter or anticipate a “problem” which cannot be solved by reading in an experiential manner.

When we read studially we operate all the fundamentals of experiential reading normally but we might put extra and deliberate energy into those which are of direct relevance to the potential solving of the “problem”. In addition we put into conscious operation auxiliary strategies which are designed to focus processing energy on aspects of reading of direct relevance to the “problem”. Studial reading is obviously more demanding than experiential reading and if overused it can lead to cognitive overload and reading inefficiency. Proficient readers only read in a studial manner when they really need to.

Strategies in Studial Reading
These are strategies used in studial reading. Such reading strategies include skimming, scanning, sampling, skipping, deduction of meaning, recognising main points, using dictionary skills and transcoding information into diagrammatic display. Such strategies are an important part of a proficient reader's repertoire but they are only used when necessary. Overuse of strategies can significantly reduce reading efficiency and effectiveness.

Tactics in Studial Reading
There are many different ways in which each strategy can be put into operation. For example, skimming can be achieved by reading only titles, sub-titles and captions, by focusing only on nouns and verbs, by reading only the beginnings and ends of paragraphs, by reading only the first part of each sentence or by placing a diagonal mask over the text and reading only what is revealed. I am using the term tactics to refer to the different ways of actually realising a strategy.
Tactics vary according to text type and task, to motivation, to personal experience and to personal inclination. Proficient readers continue to develop and refine their repertoire of tactics for each strategy and they select appropriate strategies and contextually effective tactics whenever they read in a studied manner.

**Reading Skills**

I am using the term **skill** to refer to the ability to use a particular instrument, strategy or tactic in a consistently effective way. Proficient readers have developed all the experiential fundamentals to the level of skills and are able to use them effectively without conscious effort. They have also developed strategic skills and are able to use context specific tactics consciously and effectively when it is appropriate to do so.

**The Aim of Proficient Readers**

Proficient readers aim at sufficient rather than total understanding of a text they are reading and they derive meaning from the text by confident interaction with it. Normally this is achieved experientially but they are prepared and able to read studiedly when, and only when, this is the only way they can achieve sufficient understanding for their reading purpose.

**Features of L2 Reading**

In a number of experiments with intermediate level learner readers Tomlinson (1996, 1997, 1998b) found that most of them used mainly low level cognitive strategies (i.e. those which aim at decoding the words of the text in order to achieve an efficient response) and very few achieved a higher level representation. For example, in one experiment conducted at Nanzan University in Nagoya, forty-two students were asked to read the first page of A Pale View of Hills (Ishiguro, 1982) and then to answer questions about the reading strategies they used when reading it. Twenty-seven of the forty-two said that they had used a dictionary to help them to understand difficult words, thirty-three said that they had translated the story and twenty-two said that they had read the difficult sentences many times.

This emphasis by EFL learners on the decoding of words is also reported by a number of other researchers. For example, Hosenfeld (1984) reports on an experiment in which unsuccessful foreign language readers “tended to: lose the meaning of sentences as soon as they had decoded them” and Knight, Padron & Waxman (1985) investigating the reading strategies reported by ESL students concluded that their “primary concern was with low level decoding skills”.

It seems that the reading of many intermediate level L2 readers is characterised by the following:

- **Aiming at Complete Comprehension**
  Most L2 learners begin reading in the L2 with a commitment to achieving total comprehension. In many cases this is reinforced by being asked to read in the L2 before they have acquired enough language to automatize some of the decoding. As Swaff (1988) says, “Whereas in the L1 we process familiar words automatically, in an L2 our cognitive attention is more often on unfamiliar meanings rather than connecting concepts”. This need for total comprehension is also often reinforced by the learners’ insecurity, by their view that you learn a language by learning its words, by the brevity of the texts and by the insistence of teachers and textbooks on asking comprehension questions which focus attention on discrete portions of the text.

- **Reading Studially**
  L2 learners tend to read studiedly regardless of the type of text or the purpose for reading it. Such reading is inevitably slow, laborious and unrewarding. Its persistence into intermediate levels (encouraged by short texts and comprehension questions) provides little incentive for out of class or after course reading.

- **Being Text Focused**
  The inevitable result of aiming for complete comprehension by reading studiedly is that many L2 readers are text focused. They are passively dependent on an efficient reading of the writer’s words and make little attempt to connect the words or to fill in the blanks. They are not interacting with the text, they are utilising only verbal connections in the brain (Masuhara, 1998) and they are therefore not able to achieve anything but a partial representation of the text.

- **Overusing Cognitive Strategies**
  When reading studiedly, L2 learners inevitably over-use such cognitive strategies as pausing to think, re-reading carefully, using the dictionary, translating the text and memorising the words. These are all strategies which slow down and exhaust the reader and which, when over-used, can increase rather than lighten the load. This can be true also of those cognitive strategies taught to learners by well-meaning teachers and textbooks. Such strategies as deduction of meaning from context and locating key sentences can be useful if applied to help solve significant problems; but they can also cause cognitive over-load if they are used as normal features of the reading process. As Day and Bamford say (1998: 47), “A skills approach to the teaching of reading has achieved a sort of unstoppable momentum. The dominance of skills ... leaves little room for considering other approaches.”
A BEGINNING READING PROGRAMME FOR L2 LEARNERS

The following L2 reading programme aims at the development of reading confidence and competence through ensuring that early experiences of reading in the L2 are positive, enjoyable and successful.

BEGINNERS LEVEL

NO CONTINUOUS READING

L1 learners do not begin to read until they have a substantial vocabulary. If L2 learners begin to read before they have achieved a basic linguistic threshold level (Alderson, 1984: 19; Clarke, 1980) they will have to devote most of their processing energy to the low level decoding of language items. This means that they will have to resort to glossaries, dictionaries and translation and that L2 reading could become established as a laborious task aimed at learning language, or at best at achieving an “efficent” response to the “public” information put into the text by its author(s) (Rosenblatt, 1978). This dependent, non-interactive reading style can persist to intermediate and advanced levels of learning (Clarke, 1980) where it is often reinforced by a continuing “beginners model” which emphasises language instruction rather than reading instruction (Eskey, 1973). Or, worse still, it can prevent learners from ever becoming advanced.

It is important therefore that L2 beginners are not asked to read. Day and Bamford (1998: 47) attack the advocates of delaying reading” until students have a solid ability to speak and understand the second language” and propose instead the provision of readers with very simple vocabulary. My reaction is that such readers would inevitably be so reduced as to be banal and therefore unlikely to attract learners to reading. I am not proposing a long delay, just one sufficient to allow the learners to gain enough sight vocabulary and confidence in the L2 to allow them to enjoy initial readers with some substance.

LISTENING TO READINGS

The learners’ desire for continuous text can be met at this level by providing opportunities for learners to listen to texts being read aloud. Such readings (just like those from parent to child) can elicit “aesthetic responses” (Rosenblatt, 1978) which can achieve the engagement required for deep processing of content and language. They can also satisfy the need to achieve meaningful communication in the new language and act as a preparation for eventual experiential reading by the learners. This is because listening to a text does not give the learners time to focus on low level decoding of each word. It does not require recognition of familiar language in an unfamiliar medium and the extra-linguistic features of a reading (e.g. sound effects; pauses; dramatic use of the voice; facial expressions) can increase the redundancy of the actual language of the text. This approach can help develop
high level comprehension skills if the learners are encouraged to use visualisation and inner speech whilst and after listening.

In my experience, the most effective way to give beginners a holistic experience of a written text is to use it as a basis for a TPR Plus activity (Tomlinson, 1994, 1999) in which the learners all act out the “story” of the text as the teacher reads it aloud. This can obviously be done with narrative texts but it can also be effective with scientific texts describing experiments or processes and with instructions for playing games or making models.

**WORD RECOGNITION**

Whilst advising against making beginners read continuous text I do recommend that they are shown many of the words that they have learned from listening. This caters for visual learners, gives a sense of progress and prepares the learners for the automatic recognition of words they will eventually need in order to achieve effective reading. One way of doing this is to introduce new words aurally through TPR activities and then to put the words on the board and get the learners to associate the written word with its referent (e.g. “Pick up the can in one hand. Now underline the word “can” on the board with your other hand.”). Another way is listing key words from a TPR Plus story on the board after it has been performed by the learners and then telling the story again as they look at the words. Yet another way is to play word games such as hangman or mini-scrabble.

**ELEMENTARY LEVELS**

**EXTENSIVE READING:**

I am recommending that we should reverse the conventional reading start and give elementary learners a chance to establish experiential reading as the norm in the foreign language. This means not giving them little texts with comprehension questions on the literal meaning of expressions in the text but instead giving them lengthy texts with no questions at all. Such a start can give learners a positive, successful introduction to L2 reading if they are allowed to read what they want.

At this level, readers need to be specially written to make stories and topics potentially accessible and interesting to the diverse audience they have been written for but they should not be strictly controlled by prescriptions of lexical and structural level. This sort of reader could be written in-house or commercially (e.g. The Cambridge English Readers series launched in 1999) and can be helped by:

- using “good friends” which are similar in appearance and meaning to words in the learner’s language(s) or are universally recognisable (e.g. taxi, video, hospital) (Tomlinson, 1987);
- using universally relevant themes which are likely to achieve an affective response (e.g. growing up; going to school; love, the family; marriage; old age);
- using genre frameworks which are universally familiar (e.g. fairy stories, folk tales);
- using illustrations which establish, continue and develop the story rather than just illustrate a small section of the text;
- using L1(s) to establish, continue and develop an L2 story;
- getting the learner and the teacher to develop a reading text together based on a keen learner interest;
- having recorded readings of the text to lead learners into it (as in the Cambridge English Readers series).

These “readers” should be authentic in the sense that they do not make everything explicit and they do require the reader to contribute meaning to the text by mentally filling in gaps. The teachers should not teach or test the learners but they could suggest that they use inner speech and create mental pictures as they read.

**INTAKE RESPONSE TASKS**

These are tasks which invite the learners to interact actively with a text in order to produce meaning for themselves and which then focus on the learners’ responses to what they have read rather than on what the writer intended to say. Such tasks encourage experiential reading and can facilitate the sort of aesthetic response to texts which can lead to engagement and deep processing. These types of tasks are referred to as “reader response” tasks by Ali (1994) and by Hirvela (1996), who recommends them because of the “involvement” they can help the learner to achieve.

Examples of intake response tasks would be:

1. How do you feel about the owner of the factory? Do you think he did the right thing? Do you like him?
2. What did this page make you think about? Has it changed your views? See Tomlinson, 1998c, 1999 for more examples of intake tasks

**DEVELOPMENT TASKS**

Development tasks are language production tasks which ask the learners to develop a theme, character, viewpoint, topic etc. which they have just encountered in a reading text. So, if for example, they have just read *They Came From the Sea Part 1* they can be asked in groups to write *They Came from the Sea Part 2* or, if they have read an advertisement for the C5 (a vehicle which was not a success) they can
be asked to design an improved C6 (Ellis and Tomlinson, 1987: 11-12). Such tasks can help to deepen the learners' understanding of the base text and also provide a stimulus for creative use of language. They are also developmental in the sense that they help to develop not only the linguistic competence of the learners but also such desirable attributes as analysis, imagination and creativity. At lower levels in mono-lingual classes any group discussion could be done in the L1 and even if the language production was in the L1 the activity could still achieve the first aim of deepening understanding of the L2 text.

CONCLUSION

After seeing so many L2 learners inhibited from developing reading confidence and fluency I am convinced that the most useful thing we can do is to help our learners to establish sufficient understanding as their L2 reading goal and experiential reading as their L2 norm. We can then go on to help them at higher levels to read intensively and to transfer and to develop reading strategies which they can use when they need to read studiously in order to achieve sufficient understanding of a particular text for a particular purpose. If we achieve this, our learners can become confident and proficient readers in the L2 and can go on to read forever.

REFERENCES


