DEVELOPING READING CONFIDENCE: REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

J.Y.K Kerr

In Lower Secondary schools teachers have, rightly I believe, placed the main emphasis in Form I classes on listening and speaking. Reading is used mainly as a means of reinforcing a number of basic grammatical patterns (and to a lesser extent vocabulary) which have already been explained and practised orally. Much reading is carried out under the teacher's direct guidance within the lesson partly because weaker pupils lack confidence in reading on their own and partly because there is often a lack of sufficient simple reading material in English in the school library. Reading passages are deliberately confined to a limited number of grammatical structures, and new vocabulary (also limited in amount) is often pre-taught. This is a perfectly reasonable way to show children that they can understand a piece of written English if they are willing to recognize and remember what they already 'know'.

But if one turns to the sort of reading which will be required of them in, say, the SRP examination, the gulf seems truly enormous. Such reading seems scarcely simplified at all and contains: long, complex sentences, a wide variety of grammatical patterns, a huge vocabulary with a high proportion of compound or polysyllabic words. How on earth is the gulf to be bridged?

I should like to select three or four obvious factors which contribute to reading difficulty and to suggest for each how teachers can help their pupils to confront them. (If any native English speaker wishes to be reminded of what the difficulties of reading a foreign language are, obtain a Bahasa Malaysia newspaper and try to decipher a paragraph or two!)

1. *Inability to cope with unknown words*

The experienced reader of a foreign language can probably tolerate around 7% of unknown vocabulary without beginning to feel real discomfort. But our pupils are in the main *in*experienced readers. If the vocabulary they need for reading is always pre-taught, they are unlikely to develop sound strategies for 'living with uncertainty'. One way of leading them to cope with unknown vocabulary is to encourage them to guess the meaning from the context. It is possible to devise simple exercises using familiar formats to focus attention on this:

(This example is meant for English speaking teachers, not pupils!)

1.   'He jumped into the shay.'

Q1.   Is *shay*

    a)   some kind of water

    b)   plants growing thickly

    c)   a house or part of a house

    d)   a kind of car or cart

    e)   earth or mud?

2. 'He jumped into the shay and put his bag on the seat.'

Q2. Is *shay*

   a) some kind of water

   b) plants growing thickly

   c) a house or part of a house

   d) a kind of car or cart

   e) earth or mud?

3. 'He jumped into the shay and put his bag on the seat beside him; the horse began to move.'

Q3 Is *shay*

   a) some kind of water

   b) plants growing thickly

   c) a house or a part of a house

   d) a kind of car or cart

   e) earth or mud?

For the correct answer (but of course you've guessed it!) see the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.

Another possible technique is to ask the whole class to read a passage silently, getting each pupil to underline in pencil any words or phrases which he doesn't understand. (It helps if the passage is also written up on the blackboard to provide a central focus later on.) Pupils can then briefly form pairs or small groups to see if their underlinings coincide. There is likely to be some exchange of information between pupils (if in the mother tongue, never mind) resulting in fewer underlinings in the text. Now take the passage sentence by sentence, asking pupils to call out words they still don't understand in the order in which they appear in the text. These are dealt with one at a time by inviting guesses from the class. Write up all the guesses for a particular word at the side of the board. Ask pupils to choose the best guess. Using guiding questions, but still not revealing the answer, show that some guesses are much more sensible than others. Proceed to the next 'unknown' and repeat the process. If the class is alert, some pupils may want to revise previous guesses as they begin to relate them to subsequent clues in the passage (one of the golden rules of reading being: If you don't understand at once, read a bit further). The process takes quite a long time but bit by bit the underlinings should begin to disappear (the children gradually rubbing out their pencil marks) as the corporate guessing of the whole class overcomes the difficulties. One may have to conduct this sort of lesson two or three times using different types of text: narrative, dialogue, expository writing etc. But if the children do grasp the deductive approach, and the use of the context and their own knowledge of the world, to approximate to the meaning of the 'unknowns', the investment in time should pay off handsomely.

2. *Inability to recognize the syntactic relationships between words*

Look at the Bahasa newspaper again:

'Buku adalah ciptaan manusia yang kekal dan tidak ada tolok bandingnya.' Quite apart from what the individual words mean, we need to know whether 'ciptaan' is: a verb? a noun?; whether 'manusia' is: a verb? a noun? if noun, subject or object? an adverb? and so forth. Malaysian schoolchildren must face just the same problems with English. This is not a plea for the formal analysis of English sentences ('parsing' as it used to be called) but a recommendation that pupils should be made sensitive to the syntactical signals that are part of the message.

How? Substitution tables and sentences with jumbled word order are two simple, traditional devices; blanking out different words in a given sentence one at a time and asking pupils to suggest other words to replace them with is another.

A further possibility is for the teacher to show how parts of a sentence are closely bound in terms of meaning by inserting slant lines between one phrase and the next. Once pupils grasp the idea, they can be asked to insert pencilled slant lines in a short text before they attempt any detailed decoding of it. The relationship with meaning can be made clearer if the teacher reads aloud part of a text phrase by phrase: e.g. 'They were advancing/in a line/up the hill' etc. while the pupils 'read and look up', repeating each phrase in chorus. This activity is best conducted briefly but often and is certainly more helpful to understanding than the procedure of individual pupils reading aloud in turn round the class.

3. *Inability to recognize the rhetorical organization of a written text*

We must certainly not encourage pupils to develop a word by word approach to reading. Even very simple texts have some sort of overall design: e.g. in a narrative: First . . . then . . . next . . . finally . . . or in a piece of expository writing: first general statement followed by example; second general statement followed by example etc. Once again this is *not* to argue in favour of 'naming of parts.' There are much, much simpler ways of showing how a written message coheres: boxes round connecting words and phrases, arrows in coloured chalk to reveal backward and forward references etc.

But we do have to teach what the rhetorical markers mean, starting with, for example, *and, but, or* and *because* in Form 1, including *if, unless, so* etc. in Form 2 and with luck getting on to *however, in spite of, therefore* etc. in Form 3. I have not included 'time' markers in these examples but they are just as important as the markers of reasoning.

4. *Inability to recognize the elements of derived words*

In some respects this links up with the problem of unknown vocabulary. The difference is that a pupil can often understand an unfamiliar word if he puts all his relevant experiences of the language together. This aspect gets specific mention in the LSS Syllabus in Unit 40 i.e. at the end of the notional Form 2 programme. But work on it should, I feel, start much earlier. For example, in Form 1 pupils can be asked: If *unhappy* means 'not happy,' what do: *unwise, unhelpful, unimportant* mean?

In Form 2, there are opportunities for showing that *wide* relates to *width*, *high* to *height* and so on; but with *happy* the relationship is expressed differently: *happiness.* If pupils take all this in (who can say if they will?), then they should recognize what *unhappiness* means even if they have never seen the word before.

In short we must ensure that reading assignments are not merely tests in disguise on the one hand; or on the other, that all the inherent difficulties met in reading a foreign language are simplified away. Of course reading programmes have to be carefully graded in difficulty and we should focus on one reading problem at a time, not try to teach all the strategies at one go. But if we don't show children how to tackle the problems by themselves, bit by bit, we cannot claim that we are teaching them how to read English unaided, which must surely be one of the long-term goals of the secondary school English programme.

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