SHAPING READING TASKS FOR THE MUET: DEVELOPING THE CRAFT

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ABSTRACT

In the last several decades, theories and models of reading have changed from seeing reading as primarily receptive processes from text to reader to interactive processes between the reader and the text (cf., Adams, 1990; Eskey and Grabe, 1988; Perfetti, 1985; Samuels, 1994; Stanovich, 1992; and Swaffar, 1988). Approaches to the teaching of foreign language reading have attempted to reflect this development through interactive exercises and tasks. The use of authentic materials is an integral aspect of such activities, and in our experiences as language teachers, we have seen that well-designed reading comprehension activities could help students interact with the text to create or construct meaning. Many guidelines are available to address key issues for the development of appropriate materials. This paper discusses some considerations, both linguistic and non-linguistic, that influence the designing of reading comprehension materials for the MUET (Malaysian University English Test). The influencing features are discussed in relation to the materials designed for the book *Best Practice in MUET*.

Introduction

When we began to develop reading comprehension materials for the book *Best Practice in MUET*, we based our understanding on the fundamental nature of reading and the components of the reading process. They include the following:

- Alphabetics: the basic process of using letters in an alphabet to represent sounds in the spoken word. Needed skills include knowledge of basic sounds (phonemes) and an understanding of the relationship between these sounds and letters (phonics).
- Fluency: ability to read with speed and ease.
- Reading comprehension as a construction process: this process involves the use of many sub-components to derive meaning from text.

In essence, the construction process involves at least two people ˘ the reader and the writer. The reader has to decode the writer s words and then use his own background knowledge to construct an approximate understanding of the writer s message. In the construction process, all the elements of the reading process thus

work together as a text is read, to create a representation of the text in the reader s mind. Approaches to the teaching of ESL reading have attempted to reflect the various stages in the processing through interactive exercises and tasks.

In fact, in the last several decades, theories and models of reading have changed, from seeing reading as primarily encompassing receptive processes from text to reader to interactive processes between the reader and the text (cf., Adams, 1990; Eskey and Grabe, 1988; Perfetti, 1985; Samuels, 1994; Stanovich, 1992; and Swaffar, 1988). The use of authentic materials is an integral aspect of such activities, and in our experiences as language teachers, we have seen that well-designed reading comprehension activities help students interact with the text and create or construct meaning accurately. Therefore, the issue of materials is considered a key factor in the development of reading comprehension skills among ESL learners by language practitioners.

Allwright (1990) argues, rightly so, that materials should teach students to learn. The materials should act as resources for ideas and activities for learning. Allwright further emphasises that materials control learning and teaching. O Neill (1990), in a similar vein,   states that authentic materials help learning and teaching.

In the Malaysian ESL classroom, it is true that teachers and students rely heavily on prescribed textbook materials which determine the content, methods, and procedures of learning. Students learn what is presented in the textbook, and the way the textbook presents material is often the way students learn it. The educational philosophy reflected in the textbook will exert a major influence on classroom teaching and learning. However, the MUET situation provides an unique opportunity in material development for the teacher. The inception of MUET came without a prescribed textbook to help develop the strategic reader (cf. Chan, 2003). Rather, it was introduced through the emphasis of a test syllabus which then formed the basis for instructional purposes (Malaysian University English Test: Regulations and Scheme of Test, Syllabus, and Sample Questions, 1999). In the absence of prescribed textbooks, teachers are unconstrained in tapping innovative efforts in the   presentation of   materials to shape the learning experience. Nonetheless, good practice calls for some thought that could act as guidelines for material development and the attention given to these considerations could facilitate the effort of material preparation to meet learners and teachers needs especially for the novice teachers.

This paper discusses the considerations, both linguistic and non-linguistic, that influenced the designing of reading comprehension materials for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The influencing features are discussed in relation to the materials designed for the book *Best Practice in MUET* that reflect the writers immersion into the effort of material production. In this description, we

will illustrate some pertinent processes that could help the learners develop their reading comprehension skills, and make suggestions especially as how this might be achieved through the use of authentic materials for the purpose of enhancing the learners reading ability in an academic context.

Linguistic Considerations in the Development of Reading Comprehension Materials

In the discussion on linguistic considerations, we deal with issues that cover content and task design in relation to material development.

Content Issues

Littlejohn and Windeatt (1989) argue that materials have a hidden curriculum that includes attitudes toward knowledge, attitudes toward teaching and learning, attitudes toward the role and relationship of the teacher and student, and values and attitudes related to gender, society, etc. Materials, in fact, have an underlying instructional philosophy, approach, method, and content, including both linguistic and cultural information; that is, choices made in material writing are based on the beliefs that the writers have about assumptions on what language is and how it should be used.

The first factor for the material developer is to consider the writing or the adapting of a text on which reading tasks are to be subsequently devised. It anchors basically on language use. The language used in the text, first and foremost, should reflect correct, natural, and Standard English. Since the learner s vocabulary is often limited, the vocabulary in the materials should be controlled or the material should provide adequate information to help learners understand vocabulary that they may not be familiar with. By and large, it is imperative that materials be written in plain language. Plain language is defined as having a clear, simple, and conversational style and one that presents information in a logical order.

Language style in terms of sentence structure could be controlled. The use of the active voice is encouraged, bearing in mind, that the reader needs to be engaged and this could be facilitated by including a shared context, or resorting to other techniques such as using a question and answer approach or linking information to trusted sources. To invite the learner s attention, we attempted to vary sentence rhythm and sentence length. Short sentences averaging 8-10 words are seen as ideal as long complex clauses tend to contain multiple ideas and therefore should be avoided.

Other features of clear writing that need attention are the conscious omission of needless words, use of sentence structures that are evident and unambiguous and choosing an organisation and structure that is orderly and logical to aid read-

ing. Grammar could also be controlled especially if the material developer is thinking about students who have a lower level of language ability.

Placing emphasis on these linguistic elements is important in the early stage of material development. A text that is well organised and clear is called a considerate text *f* while a text that is poorly organised and difficult to understand is an inconsiderate text. *f* The more inconsiderate the text, the more work will be required of a reader to comprehend the text. Learners who do not have the background, ability, or motivation to overcome the barriers presented in inconsiderate texts will have more difficulty comprehending the text. Students who struggle with decoding rarely have a chance to interact with more difficult texts and often learn to dislike reading. It is therefore crucial that the materials writer pays close attention to these initial linguistic details. It is worth noting that learners with poorly developed language skills and strategies will not have the tools to take advantage of the obvious structures and comprehension cues that are part of considerate text nor will they have the extra tools needed to overcome the barriers of inconsiderate text.

Task Design Issues

Authentic reading involves incorporating a variety of real reading materials, such as books, magazines, newspapers and non-linear texts into the instructional process. The discussion will begin with the designing of tasks that are based on extended reading extractions they form the bulk of the reading experience for the MUET learner especially in an academic context.

There are essentially six aspects of reading comprehension that we considered in the designing of our reading comprehension passages. We do not intend this taxonomy to cover all possible interpretations of reading comprehension; however, we found the six broad aspects to be useful in guiding the task formulation bearing in mind the needs of the interactive readers. The taxonomy listed below has been influenced in particular by the work of Pearson and Johnson (1972) and Nuttall (1996). It was found, however, that more often than not, there were overlaps in the skills listed.

a. *Literal comprehension.* This refers to an understanding of the straightforward meaning of the text such as facts, vocabulary, dates of events, and locations. Questions of literal comprehension can be answered directly and explicitly from the text. Literal comprehension tasks are normally the earlier ones that the learners face to make sure that they have read and understood the basic or surface meaning of the text provided. An example of a very simple literal comprehension question that can be used is: *How many types of solar energy did the writers discuss?* However, such questions could be made more

sophisticated by directing learners to obtain main ideas that are expressed at paragraph level. This kind of questions requires the learner not only to understand the surface literal information but also go a step further to summarise the information as the main point or idea. Thus there were a number of questions of this nature in our book such as: What is the main idea of the last paragraph?

b. *Reorganisation.* The next aspect of comprehension is *re-organisation.* Reorganization is based, first and foremost, again on the literal understanding of text; but the learners are expected to progress to use information from various parts of the text and combine them to show additional understanding. For example, we may read at the beginning of a text that a woman named Maria Kim was born in 1945 and then later at the end of the text that she died in 1990. In order to answer this question, *How old was Maria Kim when she died?,* the student has to put together two pieces of information that are from different parts of the text. Questions that address this aspect of comprehension are important because they teach learners to examine the text in larger segments, helping them move from a sentence-by-sentence consideration of the text to a more global view.

Re-organisation could also involve accurate paraphrasing of ideas such as: Which of the following ideas is expressed in paragraph 6?

A Rickshaws traditionally had helped the city to rid its air pollution problem.
B Getting the rickshaws off the road is a plan welcomed by millions of city dwellers.
C The Word Bank has recommended that the government reduce the number of rickshaws.
D The government is sympathetic to the plight of the rickshaw pullers but it has to ban the use of rickshaws in the future.

(The text is about the plight of rickshaws pullers in Dhaka)

Learners have to be taught close reading in order to paraphrase ideas accurately.

c. *Inference.* Making inferences certainly involves more than literal understanding. Students may initially have a difficult time answering inference questions because the answers are based on material that is in the text but not explicitly stated. An inference involves students combining their literal understanding of the text with their own knowledge and intuition. The answer is not in the text but there is information in the text that allows the reader to make a

good inference. Readers are required to use their own knowledge with what they have gained from reading the text, to construct an appropriate answer. Often the line is grey as to what constitutes an inference or a conclusion. For that matter, questions that ask for implications also fall in the same category. The main point is that the learner needs to interact with the text at a level that calls forth the processing skills whereby a rational opinion or judgment is made to show understanding of an attitude. For example, a question asked may be: Which of the following describes the reaction of the public towards the problem of illegal downloading?

A unconcerned
B sympathetic
C annoyed
D angry

(The text is about downloading of songs from the Internet)

d. *Prediction.* The fourth aspect, prediction, involves students using both their understanding of the passage and their own knowledge of the topic and related matters in a systematic fashion to determine what might happen next or after an argument ends. We use two varieties of prediction, while-reading and post-(after) reading. While-reading prediction questions differ from post-reading prediction questions in that students can immediately learn the accuracy of their predictions by continuing to read the passage. For example, students could read the first two paragraphs of a passage and then be asked a question about the writer s attitude. A post-reading question may be: The above passage is most likely found in a magazine about

A travel
B health
C beauty
D handicraft

(The text is about visiting Borsang in Thailand, well known for making hand-crafted umbrellas)

e. *Recognising the functional value of the sentence or sentences.* This aspect calls for the recognition of textual signals used by the writer that exerts a reaction from the reader. The manipulation of the mechanics in writing such as the following illustrates that the learner needs to develop his sensitivity not

just to words but also to syntactical patterning that utilises available mechanics as a resource for expression.

The dash in the sentence (line 6): Fifty years after the project began the team is half way through ˘ the first letter f signals

A a cause
B a contrast
C an example
D a comparison

(The text is about the tedious work in compiling a dictionary on Sanskrit)

f. *Vocabulary use (which includes word level or phrasal level and use of referent words)* This final aspect of comprehension, according to our categorization, focuses on deriving contextual meaning which encourages the learner to make forward and/or backward referencing to obtain the clues for textual interpretation. Selection of relevant vocabulary tasks could depend on its significant contribution to the understanding of the text. For example, a question asked: The writer says. The example of Coca Cola is instructive f (line 71). This means that the company s experience gives

A insights into people s reaction to health threats
B advice about the nature of consumer behaviour
C evidence of how businesses are unable to meet market demand
D information about the unpredictability in the sales of bottled water

(The text is about health concerns in relation to drinking bottled water)

Aside from the use of extended reading extracts, reading can also be enhanced through the use of the cloze and non-linear texts. As for the cloze, the instructional purpose is focused mainly on getting learners to read with a holistic understanding. While the technique is artificial in the sense that in real life we do not read incomplete texts presented in that fashion, it nonetheless is also included as a technique to gauge reading ability. The point remains that part and parcel of the reading process is aligned to making intelligent guesses or to construct the whole when parts are missing. To activate this construct, many reading authorities view the cloze as a robust tool to train readers on comprehension of a text. The cognitive processing is manipulated through the variation of the deletion pattern to make the task easier or more difficult. Teachers need to be reminded that normally every fifth deletion pattern sets the lower limit for word omission. The MUET has decided on

an every eighth deletion pattern as this is arbitrarily set to maintain a balance in difficulty level. In designing cloze passages, aside from considering the deletion pattern, another important guideline is to ensure that the words deleted are not too technical or specialised in meaning, as this will pose difficulty even for the most proficient learners. The sense of the passage itself should also be complete in order to aid its reconstruction. As such, cloze passages chosen in our book cover topics which are of general academic interest such as those related to culture, health and education.

Non-linear texts are viewed as representative materials in real life use. Designing such materials was found to be very challenging as we have to source vigorously for such visuals resorting to reports, academic textbooks, encyclopedic entries and even office literature such as forms used by hotels and restaurants. Transfer skills are emphasised as learners are encouraged to delineate their thoughts into flow charts or diagrams. More challenging in task formulation is the design of questions that tap on inference skills in this form of reading. We exploited situational inferences that require learners to apply the data or facts presented. For example, the following question was posed:

Uncle Chong likes high protein food. Which of the following *dim sum* items would he choose?

A   wonton
B   taro cake
C   beancurd
D   spring roll

(Information is presented in a table that shows the figures about the nutrient contents of a variety of *dim sum*)

To answer the question, the learner will need to scan the information and isolate the relevant figures for the identified items. This manner of reading calls into play the understanding of visuals and its meaning where lexical description is kept to a minimum.

Non-Linguistic Considerations in the Development of Reading Comprehension Materials

In this section, the non-linguistic considerations discussed are those that concern instruction and the design layout.

Instructional Issues

The use of materials for instruction should have clear pedagogic procedure and methods, that is, the teacher and learners should be able to understand what is expected for each activity. The materials should provide support for learning. The instructor must bear in mind the pedagogical approaches to language teaching such as devising a vocabulary list, including exercises which cover or expand on the content, using visual aids, etc.

Any cultural information included in the materials should be accurate and recent. It should not be bias. It could also include visual aids to help students understand cultural information. It is the duty of materials writers to activate existing background knowledge (content schemata) by relating the content of the text to the learner s own cultural experiences. Materials writers need to provide a non-threatening learning environment that integrates the learner s cultural background and experiences into the instructional process. One important part of interactive process theory emphasises schemata, the reader s pre-existing concepts about the world and about the text to be read. Into this framework, the reader fits what he or she finds in any passage. If new textual information does not fit into a reader s schemata, the reader may misunderstand the new material, ignore the new material, or revise the schemata to match the facts within the passage. Content schemata encapsulates background knowledge about the cultural orientation or content of a passage. Formal schemata defines reader expectations about how pieces of textual information will relate to each other and in what order details will appear (Carrell, 1987). Deciphering the text at a surface level does not guarantee understanding. Often, learners struggle with the text due to cultural differences. The richness of a text inevitably is tied up with content schemata which material developers must dig in and activate to make reading meaningful.

The written or selected materials should be useful, meaningful and interesting for students. While no single subject will be of interest to all students, materials should be chosen based on, to a considerable extent, what students in general are likely to find interesting and motivating. As a rule of thumb, the language used in the materials should be slightly higher in their level of difficulty than the perceived students current level of proficiency. Materials at a slightly higher level of difficulty than the students current level of English proficiency should challenge them to learn new grammatical structures and vocabulary.

The type of instruction that a learner receives will also affect reading comprehension. Strategies for improving reading comprehension must be taught directly by teachers. Simply providing opportunities or requiring ESL children to read will not teach many of them the comprehension strategies they need to become profi-

cient readers. A conscious and direct intervention needs to be in place and should continue in different forms throughout a student s school experience. The materials writer s role is to aid teachers with the development of reading comprehension material that will allow learners to understand cues and structures that are often used in a reading text. Thus, the level of reader comprehension of the text may be determined largely by how well the reader variables (interest level in the text, purpose for reading the text, knowledge of the topic, foreign language abilities, awareness of the reading process, and level of willingness to take risks) interact with the text variables (text type, structure, syntax, and vocabulary) (Hosenfeld, 1979). Closely linked with instructional issues are the layout design issues.

Design Layout Issues
The design layout of material can make reading easier or more difficult. Recommendations on layout often include giving attention to the following:

Type and spacing
o Use a readable type style ˘ generally a footed font [serif] in 12 point size
o Use appropriate space between lines [generally 1.2 to 1.5 spacing]
o Provide good contrast between the paper and the text
  ▪ Do not print words on shaded or patterned background
o Use upper and lower case
  ▪ avoid all capital text
o Include ample white space

For any book publication, the publishers have a large say on the selection of a style and size of typeface (lettering). For those who have the opportunity to design the layout, bear in mind that it should be one that is easy to look at and read. Generally, a simple type face without italics, serfs, or curls is friendly to read. A mixing of upper and lower case lettering is recommended. A mixed style is easier to read than LETTERING IN ALL CAPITALS. Basically, material developers should rely on what is pleasing to the eye. Some other non-linguistic considerations involve:

Overall design
o Be consistent
o Avoid clutter
o Provide a guide for finding key information
o Clearly label all illustrations and charts
  ▪ Offer explanations

- ▪ Make legends clear
- ▪ Place charts as close as possible to explanatory text
o Use consistent and easily recognised headings

If your written material does not attract the attention of its audience, chances are your message will never be read. Both the overall visual presentation and the written message are important when developing useful and effective materials. Your format should be simple and uncluttered, with a balanced arrangement of the text, illustrations, and other design features. Once you have finished formatting, try the upside-down test. If you turn the finished layout upside-down, it should look as good and be as appealing as it does right side up.

Summary and Conclusion

If we believe that reading is an interactive process in which the reader constructs meaning with the text, then we need to help our students learn to do this by paying close attention to both the linguistic and non-linguistic considerations. The learner should be the focus of material development as he is the centre in curriculum development (Nunan, 1992). Materials that are developed need to have an underlying instructional philosophy, approach, method and technique which suit the learners and their needs. Learners are most successful when the teacher uses a variety of materials and the learners are actively engaged in learning.

Undergoing the process of material development is definitely a worthwhile and enlightening experience. On our part, we learnt how to write and select materials, exploit them in a manner that the learner will be challenged to make use of the many aspects of his critical faculty in arriving at an understanding of the text, and to present the materials in a way that would appeal to the reader in terms of wanting to know and read.

Fundamental to the success of any learning activity is the motivation of the learner. Motivation to learn can be enhanced by well thought out and well laid out materials. The use of authentic materials is one of the ways in which we can train learners to take responsibility for their own learning and help them develop confidence in their expressing of their own ideas and in their ability to work independently of a teacher in the real world.

To conclude it needs to be said that there is, however, no such thing as teacher-proof*f* materials. While it is important for the teacher to develop the craft of developing material, it is just as important to develop the art of real life classroom use of the materials. A mismatch could only lead to disastrous results, nullifying the efforts put into the craft or the art.

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