
A Programme of Reading for Forms One and Two

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Soon after I arrived in Malaysia, one of the teachers in Kolam Air told me how he had managed to improve his English. He had changed to an English-medium school and was finding it very difficult to understand what he was being taught. So he decided to spend time each day reading English on his own. But he found this very boring. All the articles in newspapers and magazines contained very many words that he did not know. Looking up a dictionary took a lot of time and he could not always decide which meaning of the word fitted the context. He had the same trouble with books, and after a few weeks he was about to give up in despair. But then he saw a simplified reader. He bought it and read it. He found it easy to read and very enjoyable. He read as many as he could and before long his standard of English improved greatly.

The Handbook to the English Syllabus for Forms One to Three encourages reading and gives a list of the simplified readers that are available, but this list is rather daunting. There are so many different series and so many stages in each series, that it is very hard for a teacher to know which books to give his pupils to read. A description of each series would be equally daunting, but it might be helpful to say a little about one series produced by each of the four main British publishers with books in this field: Longmans, Oxford, Macmillans and Heinemann.

Longman Structural Readers already comprise a very large number of titles. The majority are fiction, but there are several plays and some very interesting factual books. They are attractively produced with glossy covers and plenty of illustrations. There are six stages from a 300-word vocabulary to an 1800-word one. Not only is the vocabulary graded, but the structures are carefully controlled and the whole scheme is described in a handbook.

Oxford's Delta Readers are a new series written specially for Malaysia and Indonesia. Both vocabulary and structure are controlled and the word count is written clearly on the cover. The books are not as glossy as the Longman Structural Readers. On the other hand they are slightly cheaper and the stories have a local background. There are about a dozen titles so far, and the four levels are 600, 900, 1200, and 1500 words.

Macmillans Ranger Series are also new. There are still not very many titles but their format and scheme are on the same lines as Longmans Structural Readers. The vocabulary levels increase from 450 words to 2100

Heinemann Guided Readers are slightly different. They follow a less rigid system of vocabulary and structure control, and place great emphasis on information control. The theory is that a book may be written within a list of words and structures, but still be difficult for a student to understand because the plot is too complicated or the background of the story is unfamiliar. The Guided Readers come at three levels only: Elementary at 1100 words, Intermediate at 1600 words and Upper at 2200 words. There are eighteen titles so far and many have been written specially for the series.

There are, then, a very large number of simplified readers available, but it is not enough just to give a student any simplified reader. It must be of the right level of difficulty so that he enjoys reading it and learns some English from it. The first task for a teacher, therefore, is to establish certain levels of difficulty and to classify the titles into these levels.

At Kolam Air we are putting into practice an ideal system with no less than 9 levels of difficulty which will lead the weakest girls by easy steps from a very simple level to the 2000 word level prescribed by the Handbook. So far we have used only vocabulary as a criterion, but if a reader proves too easy or too difficult at one level, we will demote or promote it as required.

The next task is to decide which level of difficulty a student should tackle. At Kolam Air we are able to stream our girls for English. All girls of one form have English at the same time, so they can split up into different streams. Partly by trial and error, but increasingly by testing, we issue each stream with a class reader of one level of difficulty and a class library of one level easier.

For instance, we have started our Stream C of Form One on a class reader of our level G (500–600 words). It seems to be going all right. This term they will read three class readers of that level. At the end of term they will be given a test to see if they can read such books satisfactorily. If they pass the test, next term they will be given class readers from the next level up.

which Heinemann Guided Readers consciously try to avoid.) So a teacher can read the first chapter to the class or better ask the class to read it silently and answer questions that help understanding. If they don't, they will either have another book from the same level, or read one of the books again more carefully.

We spend one period per week teaching the class reader, and each reader lasts about one month. The most important part to teach is the beginning, which may be rather complicated because too many facts are compressed into too short a space. (This is the fault

Nearly all the rest of the reading is done for homework. Each week a certain number of pages are set, and a short test is given to make sure that everyone has read them. The story and the characters are discussed and sometimes there is time to examine a passage really carefully. Many readers have questions at the back and these can sometimes be used, if there is time. Work on a reader should end with a test on the whole book and a write-up of some sort in the reading notebook (see below). There are many other ways of dealing with a class reader, but whatever methods he uses, the teacher must be sure that all the girls have read and understood the book.

But it is not enough for students to read only three books a term. They should read an average of one a week, so that each term they read a total of at least 15 simplified readers. This means having a library of simplified readers arranged in levels of difficulty. It also means carefully controlling what the students read, so that they do not waste their time reading what is too easy, or (and this is much more harmful) what is too difficult.

At Kolan Air we are trying an ideal system using class libraries. Each stream is given its own box containing 40 books, all from the level that is one level easier than their class readers, Set C have at the moment a box of books from the H level (500 words with pictures on each page). They are able to read these books easily and are consolidating their grasp of English at this elementary level. They also enjoy their reading and are gaining confidence in their ability to read English.

It is very difficult to check on the reading from a library. Happily the pleasure and the novelty of reading are often sufficient incentives at first. But as the books get harder, enthusiasm can wane and all devices are legitimate if they result in books being read. Our staple is the reading notebook in which the girls record

details of each book they read, such as title, author, place and time of the story, the names of the chief characters and about ten lines on a part of the plot. We are also trying a chart on which the girls record their opinion of each book as they read it, and at the end of term we can produce a survey of the reactions of the class to that set of books, and hold quizzes with questions on all the books.

Such is the reading programme we are trying to operate. It is an ideal scheme devised for the ideal conditions of a girls residential school whose headmistresses (past and present) have allowed us to stream forms one and two for English and allocated funds to buy the books. But even in schools where money is hard to come by and where each class contains pupils with widely differing abilities in English, it should be possible for a teacher to obtain some simplified readers for his pupils. If he does, he can be confident that their ability to read and understand English will improve, just as my colleague's did, when he was at secondary school and struggling to master English.