
Choosing of Reading Materials for Intermediate Students of English as A Foreign Language

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Success or failure in any language programme is dependent to a large extent on the success or failure of the reading programme because the reading programme is the foundation and cornerstone of any systematic linguistic training. This is particularly so in second language learning, where the opportunity to speak the language may be less than often realised. But devising a reading programme for second language learners is in itself a monumental task because it has to take into account a host of factors, some of which the teacher can control and some of which she cannot. There are for instance the needs of the particular group of learners involved. This does not always mean a psychological or sociological component because it may very well have an economic dimension as well. Hence, questions relating to the learner's first language, the particular reasons for learning the second language, the differences between the two languages in relation to the script, the sounds of the language, the cost of textbooks and the accessibility, all have some bearing on the strategy adopted in the reading programme. But in devising a reading programme for a particular group of learners, the one activity that is central and of paramount importance is that of evaluation of the text involved.

The task of evaluation is the essential basis of any choice of texts. It matters very little who makes this evaluation because, in the final analysis the criteria used in the evaluation are of greater significance.

Evaluation of texts is a worthwhile academic exercise. But however laborious the procedure becomes, it is still a worthwhile exercise because many a lazy, untrained and inexperienced teacher makes the English textbook the beginning, the middle and the end of his teaching. This fact alone is justification enough for this article.

All too often the pupils and TESL teachers express dissatisfaction with the class readers and other reading materials. Reading materials are said to be too difficult, too simple, too long, too short, too advanced, too childish, too uninteresting, too concerned with local scenes, too concerned with unknown parts. Yet these

materials have been selected and carefully prescribed by the teachers who subsequently find them unsatisfactory. The reason for that is that the teachers' selection is limited to the few choices of the leading publishers of TESL readers and also to an inadequate expression of objectives.

In order to avoid indiscriminate selection three essentials seem obviously

- a) Psychological Criterion
- b) Cultural Criterion
- c) Linguistic Criterion

Prior to any consideration of criteria in reading materials, a teacher should be clear on two points:

- a) for what purpose is she making the selection
- b) What is available

A reader may be selected for many reasons especially as an examination text: Perhaps the teacher enjoyed a film based upon it; there are plenty of servicable second hand copies available in the school; it is easy to read; and many other reasons. It is helpful for a teacher to have her reasons clearly formulated as it is important to know what the publishers have to offer.

The Psychological Criterion

If the teacher assumes that the reading material is to be chosen to interest and entertain a mixed class, the teacher must bear in mind the kind of tales which her particular pupils will enjoy. She cannot just rely on the children's birthdate alone as an index of their ability to manage materials. The teacher must add to their chronological age, any information he has about the pupils' behaviour and about their experiences they have had which they will bring to the materials.

The teacher needs to recognise that some selections would be more suitable for boys than for girls. Generally, boys relish cowboys, sports, fact materials on mechanics, natural phenomenon and scientific experiments. Girls lean towards fairy tales, poetry

stories about girls like themselves in Malaysia and in other lands, now and long ago. The teacher may be able to discover their interests by asking the children, though the children are not particularly good at giving information clearly.

If it is a mixed class, then the characters should include at least one girl who plays an important part. If it is a class for whom television is the part of the home, then a report on various programmes should give the teacher a lead or the class cinema-going habit may throw light on references. She should realize that in areas where television is now common, the level of sophistication may be much greater than when most teachers were at a similar age. In general she will not be far from wrong in choosing adventure stories for this age group.

In most stories the unsophisticated reader likes to identify with one of the characters and this is helpful if the story is in a place in a setting which is more or less familiar to the intended readers. *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* is always enjoyed better than *Huckleberry Finn*. A school in a story should not be unrecognizably different from the one the pupils are studying in.

Children everywhere are great supporters of the readily identified hero against the villain. Their tendency to act out in fantasy for deeds of their folk heroes, from Robin Hood, Persens, David Crockett, to Superman, Batman and the man from U.N.C.L.E. leads to children to adopt these idealistic moral absolutes which are such essential elements in childhood. Stories in which right overcomes wrong in one form or another are usually well-liked.

Children are young in the world of today and not in the one their parents grew up in. Any attempt to forceably feed them stories which are supposed to be good for them even if to their taste, simply lessens the chances of the learners doing any reading for pleasure at all.

The steady territorial extension of mass television programmes is continuing the trend begun by the cinema of producing international folk heroes. The cowboy, sheriff and Tarzan have taken root in many different cultures. It is in fact the T.V. programmes with which the school books have most often to compete for the learners' attention out of school. Despite this, the books have two advantages of their own. The language of books is more comprehensible than the T.V. programmes; it can be picked up anytime the student has the opportunity and the desire to read.

One other important point to note is that the teacher must read the books herself prior to their being chosen for use by the class. The teacher should not choose the titles by classical reputation. If the teacher does not enjoy the reader, it is unlikely that the class will either. "Literature is caught and not taught" seems a good motto to go by.

Cultural criterion

Materials to be used for boys and girls in Malaysia should have a background which is familiar to the pupils. If the texts are set in a familiar village or town situation, they are found to be much easier to read and understand. The difficulty arises when an author is writing for readers who are unfamiliar with the background of the story. Here is a passage taken from Angus Maciver's "The New First Aid in English".

"On the wall of the old Mariner's room were numerous pictures of famous sailing ships, past and present. First there was the artist's impression of the famous Biblical ship of Noah. This was followed by many beautifully coloured prints of sailing ships in full sail. They included the "GOKSTAD", a Viking ship, which had probably voyaged to Iceland and Greenland; the "SANTA MARIA", in which Columbus discovered the New World; the "GOLDEN HIND" in which Drake sailed round the globe; the "SAN PEDRO" a stately galleon of the great Armada which sailed to attack England; the "MAY FLOWER" in which the Pilgrim Fathers crossed the ocean to a land where they worship in freedom; the "ENDEAVOUR" in which Captain Cook discovered the Island Continent of the South Sea; the "JESUS" which despite its name, carried many negro slaves from the Dark Continent to the cotton plantations of America"

This kind of writing assumes the learner to be conversant with European history, with Christianity and with the nautical world. Historical novels frequently make their own background to overcome this problem.

It is unfortunate that most modern writing assumes that the background is common to writer and reader and thus the kind of texts may be linguistically suitable and educationally desirable could involve the greatest difficulties with the background. The background if not familiar should at least be within the pupils imaginative grasp. For example, a book that relies on an understanding of English class distinction and snobbery for its effect, will not do in Malaysia because social behaviour here is not quite like this.

Where texts contain materials that cut across existing belief, reading difficulty is increased. In a European or Western environment ghosts, spooks, goblins and a host of other “shady” apparitions are at best treated humorously and at worst something of curiosity. But in rural Malaysia they have a little more respect for ghosts and other nightly visitors. The witch-doctor in western literature is an unpleasant, unreliable cheat. Not so in Malaysia. The “bomoh” (the nearest equivalent to the witch-doctor) has little of the derogatory connotation of the witch-doctor. He is more than a doctor. He prescribes medicine. He drives away evil. He is a helper. Many a foreign teacher in rural Malaysia has discovered to his horror that his ghost stories are not treated as anything funny.

Sometimes passages or readers cause difficulty because of the content. Ronald Mackin’s ‘A Course of English Study’ (Third Reader) has a passage entitled, “Darwin – The Theory of Evolution.” The passage has always been a source of trouble, not only for the students but for the teachers as well. ‘The Origin of Species’ is hardly the subject for Islamic Malaysia!

Lack of experience of an appropriate context may make understanding of the text difficult. For example, mist, fog, snow, hailstones are just not encountered in a tropical climate.

A book may also have to be rejected because it would not be tactful to read it in a certain community. Since Malaysia is composed of such a mixed racial group of diverse cultures, religions, languages, any comparison that is presented regarding the characteristic way of behaviour of any particular race, should be presented in a manner-free of value judgements.

Linguistic criterion

Many well-chosen books have failed to appeal because they are written in a language which is sometimes too difficult or too easy for the learners. It is easy to see when the text is too childish and easy, but more difficult to know when it is too adult. How can the teacher gauge if the language in a book will be the general level of his class? How does he determine how much English his class knows and can cope with in a particular reading book?

Firstly, the vocabulary level must be appropriate. If a text has too many difficult and new words, it is unreadable. Of course a text can be toiled painfully through with innumerable explanations by the teacher or references to the dictionary but the process is too dreary, bears no resemblance to reading and is not conducive to the establishment of good learning habits.

If a teacher is following a structurally graded syllabus with a qualified vocabulary list, he will have a few problems, particularly if the vocabulary has been based on one of the well known word lists like the Michael West word list.

The complexity of the grammatical structures must not be too great. It has to be within the standard of the average pupil. Many publishers catalogues now include reading books which are graded both structurally and lexically and also include advice to teachers in deciding which are likely to suit particular classes. Even so, teachers would be wise to assess the structural complexity of passages from different authors’ writing within the “same” level of grading as each may be different from the other.

Even if the vocabulary and the grammar of the texts are suitable, a high density of idioms may make it desirable to postpone a book. In the Longman Js Simplified English series, the book “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” contains many idioms and is therefore difficult for the pupils. In three pages I look through a random, I found eleven idioms!

One must consider special register in the choice of books. A book like the New Method Supplementary Reader’s “Treasure Islands” contains a large number of nautical terms. Some of the nautical terms found at first glance were core, gally, mutiny, to cut adrift, the tiller, canted over, jib boom, bows-print. These terms may be favourable and desirable under one set of conditions and not under another. It is possible that in a non-English medium school, one would deliberately seek out interesting materials that included scientific and technological vocabulary.

The style of writing of a book is another point to consider because pupils may use what they read as model. Any archaic, old-fashioned style that contains a great deal of local dialect and eccentricity would not be suitable. An example of this would be Oscar Wilde’s “The Importance of Being Earnest.”

Miss Prism: “It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a lower street omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the living caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at Lamington. And here on the lock, are my initials. I have forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had then placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me.”

Any style that is too stilted and lacks the natural flow of the language would not be suitable. A large majority of books written specially for the learners of English as a second language are characterised by the style because the writers are consciously trying to control the structural complexity and as a result this stilted and “choppy” style emerges.

Physical features of good materials

Written materials may appear more readable through a number of physical including the size of the print, the organization of the chapter, the graphic item-charts, tables, pictures, diagrams and illustrations and transitions, the length of paragraphs and the many other arrangements which make books attractive and easy to

Flat and projected pictures have to be good because they provide a common experience or a group of concepts, which may form a basis for better reading or creative writing and have a motivation value that promotes discussion, vocabulary growth and more careful observation. If pictures are poor, learning may be inhibited. Pictures must point out something unique if the combined text and picture is to be more effective than using words. Pictures which do not relate closely to the sight vocabulary or the text may actually interfere with reading success. Simple, uncluttered pictures promote much better reading than does beautiful detailed artwork.

The criteria suggested above are only rough guides but they contain the essential features of any evaluation. A readily helpful method would be to test a book against a number of questions. A checklist of the types suggested below can be extremely useful for a teacher who has to decide from a number of choices.

- (1) Does the test provide material selected and graded according to some reasonable theory of learning?
- (2) Is the vocabulary selected, graded and repeated on some plan.
- (3) Are the reading passage varied in subject, in style and in register, interesting to the students and adequately tested in comprehension?
- (4) Is the book too costly in terms of the pupils who will need to buy it?
- (5) Does the cost represent a reasonable investment in the reading skills of the pupils?
- (6) Have costs been considered from the viewpoint

of replacement of materials, maintenance and upkeep?

- (7) Does the material demand a high degree of teacher competency?
- (8) Are the content, situation and language suitable for the maturity of the pupils?
- (9) Are the motivational possibilities of the materials realistic?
- (10) Is the material presented of interest to Malay/ Chinese/Indian students, both boys and girls?

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