

Skilled readers versus skilled readers

Extensive reading in the foreign language classroom

At a glance

Language: Any L2

Material: Readers written for language learners available in the school library

Aim: To acquire sight vocabulary ('...*accurate, swift, and automatic visual recognition of vocabulary, independent of context.*'')

Bibliography: DAY, Richard R. / BAMFORD, J. (1998): *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*. CUP (p. 12 for the preceding quote)

Learning a foreign language in our schools means first of all progressing continuously and speedily from on grammar/structure point to the next. What students get to know about the target language is much more consciously constructed than automatically mastered. During the first acquisition period (from beginner up to intermediate or upper-intermediate level), reading texts are by no means without intrinsic appeal but their primary aim is nevertheless to carry a good deal of more and more complex grammatical and structural content. 'Real' reading of large amounts of text (especially in upper-secondary schools) is thought to follow naturally after the intermediate level. And immediately the emphasis shifts towards more complex, literary reading. When it comes to testing, tasks like skimming, scanning and contextualizing require a preliminary analytical approach to the text. These reading *skills*, however, are very often not sufficiently backed up by *reading skills*, i.e. the capacity to turn the pages at a reasonable speed and with sufficient understanding - a pre-requisite for entering the worlds which can be opened through literature.

In spite of the importance of context ('text' meaning 'what is woven'; tissue), a secure grasp of the meaning(s) of single words is necessary to initiate the reading process. The single lexical item should be recognized very quickly and its semantic qualities made immediately accessible. Words in this 'category' make up the sight vocabulary of the learner. The larger the sight vocabulary, the more room there is for the much more complex task of constructing the meaning of a sentence, of a passage, and ultimately of a text as a whole. If, on the other hand, the reader has a limited sight vocabulary and too shaky a conception of many basic lexical items, the higher-order process of constructing meaning is severely hampered and it takes a long time to work out what a sentence means. To build up their sight vocabulary, the learners need to read a lot of material at or slightly below the current level of acquisition of the target language.

Language learner literature

EFL teachers are in the very comfortable situation of having access to a vast choice of material specifically aimed at learners. Day/Bamford advocate the term *language learner literature* for these kind of texts, avoiding the much used labels 'abridged' and/or 'simplified' because they carry the undertone that such readings are to be considered preliminary or even worse, infantile, whereas the serious matter has still to follow. Considering the importance of extensive reading for the language acquisition process (described as 'automaticity training'), this notion is certainly inappropriate.

Authors of these kind of texts adjust their means of expression so as to be understood by a particular audience: language learners; they act in the interest of communicative effectiveness. Any text may be well written, or badly written: this has nothing to do with its being more or less short, simple, authentic, or whatever.

To find out about the quality of a text you have to read it – not only the learner but the teacher as well. Doing this you may find out that more and more titles produced in this field today follow the procedure whereby the author tells a story without narrowly following a restrictive list of vocabulary and structures to be used, but simply with the awareness of writing for readers who are still learning. Only after a story has been written, is its level assessed. It is noticeable how much this contributes to higher quality writing. Furthermore lower level titles are often recorded on a cassette or CD. Observing learners listening to an audio support, almost unconsciously mouthing the words while running their eyes over the page makes it obvious what a powerful learning tool language learner literature can be. For the learner to make the best use of this material it is essential that s/he:

- read a lot
- read texts of his/her own choice
- read at or a little below his/her current level of acquisition of the language
- read primarily for reading's sake

Implementing extensive reading

Advocating language learner literature (and magazines for



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *la Pia de' Tolomei*.

that matter) could stop here, the only task left to the teacher being to tell the students about the benefits of using the material the school library hopefully offers.

Bearing in mind, however, the rather tight timetable students at (post-)obligatory schools have to follow, it is probably a good idea to give some more detailed guidelines to motivate the learners to set out on the road to reading.

Setting the goal

By definition the learners should be free to choose what to read and at which level. Still, as a teacher, you may want to establish - and the learners may want to know – what the appropriate level and quantity of reading is in a given period at a specific point of the language acquisition process.

Here is a little calculation (very loosely based on a formula to establish the difficulty level of a text quoted in Day/Bramford). A booklet at the 1,600 (= intermediate) word level contains usually 60 pages with 300 words per page (it's said to take the learner about two hours to read). Simply multiply these figures:

$$60 \text{ (pages)} \times 300 \text{ (words per page)} \times 1600 \text{ (word level)} \\ = 28\,800\,000$$

If a student fulfils the task of reading such a book he or she has 'done' what I called *I R* (= a quantity of what a student has read; it could be called *one Read*); thus

$$\frac{60 \times 300 \times 1600}{28\,800\,000} = 1 R$$

The assignment is then to reach a set sum of *Rs* during a specified time period. If a student prefers reading at a lower, or a higher, level the figures are changed accordingly. This way different texts on different levels remain comparable.

If, on an other hand, you as a teacher want to implement an extensive reading program on a different learner level than the 1,600 words in the example, you just take a typical reader of the the current level of your class, insert *those* figures and you have *your R* which will then serve as the unit of reference.

To give further structure to the procedure I ask my students to keep a reading log which should contain author / title / publisher / level / result of formula / time spent reading / (some) unknown words / a short text. Day/Bramford call the short texts 'reaction reports'. Among other things they list the following possibilities. The students could write about

- characters they identify with*
- points of the story or behaviour that interest them*
- points of the story or behaviour that puzzle them*
- personal experience or thoughts related to the book*
- favourite parts*
- parts they dislike*
- how they would change the story* (p. 143)

You may miss the task *summary* here. For a number of reasons Day/Bamford are rather strongly against it. As a



Avery, *March by the sea*, 1945.

matter of fact what students write *are* usually summaries although I too find the above list of tasks the ones they should rather aim for. But I think summaries are OK as long as they are for the student (and the teacher) only. If not they must be written in such a way as not to give away the story in case a future reader consults it.

Follow-ups:

• **Oral**

The students talk to each other about their books. Keep the time short (5 minutes) but have the students change partners two or three times. The students become more confident with each talk session. Draw students' attention to the importance of *active* listening (asking for clarification, voicing opinion, surprise etc).

A further step is to let the students talk briefly to the whole class. As before for the written summary and the chat in pairs/small groups, it is vital that students be careful what they say, in order not to spoil the fun for future readers of the same book.

• **Written exercises**

With a scanner and a specific programme (ZARB is widely used by language teachers; see www.zarb.de for detailed information) it is easy to create exercises. One example is a C-test (a cloze text where half the word or half the word + one letter of every other word is deleted). C-tests should be



Seikichi Itawa, *Boy reading* 1948.

roughly at the current level of language acquisition. They are frequently used as a reliable method for quick placement tests. As exercises in the classroom they reinforce the 'automaticity training' mentioned above, as the students see roughly a quarter of the text and substitute for the missing parts while reading on. Furthermore, they give immediate feedback to the students about how proficient they are at the given level; this may be the reason why students quite like to do them (as long as they are not too long and not overused). If it happens that some learners have read the text whereas others haven't that won't be a drawback because it is rather unlikely that anyone remembers a passage verbatim.

• **Tests**

You may consider giving tests based on an extensive reading programme (unfortunately the concept: *it is important because it's tested / it's tested therefore it's important* is very well rooted). A task can be to put an illustration (of which there are usually quite a few) into the context of the story. The same can be done with a short paragraph. If you know the text well, questions about specific characters and plot may be asked. In keeping with the overall approach to extended reading, the student should produce a fair amount of text within a rather short time, thus drawing on those linguistic resources s/he has readily and confidently available. Creative writing tasks are possible, too, but are probably less suitable for testing purposes.

Reading in the classroom

Once the proceedings are explained and the programme is on its way you'll find it rewarding for everybody involved. In my experience even a class of 20 students is able to keep up a library-like quietness and concentration for half an hour or even the time of a whole lesson. As a teacher, I see 20 students engaged in the language (*and, ultimately, what else do we know that leads to progress except time spent on task?*), I have time for either checking and discussing individually the students' reading logs or, if there aren't any, reading a reader myself (don't, in any case, do things which are not connected with the reading programme of the class you are with).



Jakob Lawrence, *The library*, 1960.