The Authentic Reading Experience: Building Reading Comprehension and Fluency

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Introduction
One of the main goals for many learners of English as a second or foreign language is to be able to read what are commonly referred to as authentic texts. By authentic texts, we refer to texts of all genres that are written with a native speaker audience in mind—novels, academic papers, blogs, websites, textbooks, newspapers, and magazines. Reading such texts is of course a very useful learning goal. However, research has shown that unassisted reading of such authentic texts requires a very large vocabulary, approximately 6,000-8,000 word families (Nation, 2006). Clearly, learners of English will have to do a lot of learning before they can read authentic texts with ease. The question is: how can we as teachers and materials developers most effectively assist students in achieving this quite legitimate goal?

Research on first and second language reading processes makes it clear that in order to build the skills, vocabulary, and fluency necessary to read authentic texts, learners must practice reading texts that are written or adapted to suit their level of language proficiency. Such texts make reading possible, useful, and pleasurable for even low-level learners with a very limited vocabulary. As they are written for second rather than first language learners, these types of texts are sometimes dismissed by teachers as being “inauthentic.” However, this misses the point. Such texts, when well-written, are authentic in a far more important way: they provide learners with an authentic reading experience.

The Authentic Reading Experience
Simply stated, an authentic reading experience involves the second language learner in the same kinds of reading processes and reactions that we experience when reading in our first language. For example, a learner may read a text and think, “That was really interesting. I never knew that before.” or, “That was a load of rubbish!”; or learners may be moved to tears or laughter by something they have read. These are all authentic reading experiences. One of the major reasons for using texts which are specially written for learners is to make sure that, at each level of proficiency, learners can read the foreign or second language and have a truly authentic experience.

There is thus a big difference between authentic text and authentic reading. Because of the heavy vocabulary load and structural complexity, most authentic texts—that is, texts written for native speakers—will not provide second or foreign language learners with authentic reading experiences. This is not to say that learners should not be exposed to such texts, particularly at the upper levels. However, it is instructive to revisit a point made more than 30 years ago by Henry Widdowson (1976) in an article titled The Authenticity of Language Data. Referring to all types of so-called “authentic” language input, Widdowson says, “We do not begin with authenticity; authenticity is what learners should ultimately achieve: it represents their terminal behavior.”

In order to reach the goal of reading an authentic text in English while having an authentic reading experience, learners at all levels of proficiency must have frequent opportunities to actually experience
authentic reading in English. The selection of reading material at an appropriate level for learners is therefore one of the most important decisions that a language teacher must make.

**Evaluating materials for an authentic reading Experience**

In this section, we address what teachers should look for when deciding if the texts for a reading course have the potential to provide learners not only with an authentic reading experience, but also the opportunity to develop their language skills and expand their vocabulary.

**Number of Unknown Words**

The major way in which texts are adjusted to suit the level of learners of various proficiency levels is by controlling the vocabulary that occurs in them. Often there is also control of grammatical structures, as well as help with background knowledge. Vocabulary control is carried out by reducing the number of unknown words that occur in the text. In order to be able to experience authentic reading, learners need to be able to read for understanding without being overburdened by a large number of unknown words. The research available (Hu and Nation, 2000) indicates that somewhere around two percent of the running words may be initially unknown and still allow a reasonable level of comprehension. If the number of unknown words is too large, then learners cannot participate in an authentic reading experience. That is, they cannot read the text reacting in the same way that they do when reading texts in their first language.

Even a text written using known vocabulary can be difficult to understand if learners lack background knowledge of the topic, or if their reading skills are poorly developed. A well-designed reading course will address these difficulties by providing background information, goals for reading that are appropriate for the type of text (e.g. expository, narrative), and instruction and practice in reading skills. However, regardless of how well-crafted the exercises are, a reading course book with texts containing a large number of unknown words will pose enormous reading problems. This is because such texts make it impossible for learners to read with the degree of automaticity necessary for comprehension. Without fluent, automatic word recognition, too great a burden is placed on readers’ working memory, leaving too few cognitive resources to devote to text comprehension.

When a text contains only a small number of unknown words, on the other hand, automatic word recognition can occur. This makes it possible for the reader to simultaneously recognize and understand words, while at the same time constructing a text model of comprehension. The small number of unknown words can then be skipped, or the reader can have a go at guessing their meaning from context. It is therefore critical that teachers pay close attention to the vocabulary load of the texts that they use in a reading course.

**Keeping it Real**

One oft-heard criticism of the use of simplified texts is that they sound wooden and unnatural. But this is no more true of simplified material than it is of so-called “authentic” material. Just as there are excellent, simple materials written for young children learning to read in their mother tongue, there are excellent, well-crafted materials written for adults learning a second or foreign language. The language and vocabulary may be simple, but the ideas conveyed need not be.

To evaluate the quality of simplified material, ask yourself the same questions you use when evaluating the quality of any writing. Does the text read well? That is, is there an authentic voice that comes through clearly? Do the ideas flow smoothly and logically? Does the text have the potential to teach your students
something new, to make them laugh or cry, to provoke their interest and curiosity, to make them want to read more? Are the texts well-researched and timely? In sum, are the texts engaging yet simple enough to allow for automatic, fluent reading and to provide your students with an authentic reading experience?

A Balance of Learning Opportunities: The Four Strands
In the previous section, we explained how teachers can evaluate and select reading texts to provide students with an authentic reading experience. In this section, we address the importance of selecting course materials that provide an appropriate balance of learning opportunities.

A well-balanced language course provides four major kinds of opportunities for language and vocabulary learning. We will refer to these learning opportunities as the four strands (Nation, 2007). First, there is the opportunity to learn through meaning-focused input, where learners’ attention is focused on the message of what they are reading or listening to. Second, there is the opportunity to learn through meaning-focused output, where learners are intent on conveying messages. Third, there is the opportunity to learn through language-focused learning, where learners give deliberate attention to language features. Fourth, there is the opportunity to develop fluency with what is already known. Ideally, each of the four strands should occupy roughly one quarter of the course time, including homework and opportunities for learning outside class. We suggest that teachers get into the habit of looking for the four strands in course books that they are considering adopting.

Let us look at how the four strands could occur in a course that develops reading and vocabulary.

Meaning-Focused Input
In a reading and vocabulary course, meaning-focused input occurs when learners read texts with their main attention focused on comprehending the content. A very important way of providing meaning focused input is through an extensive reading program. Meaning-focused input also occurs when learners read interesting and level-appropriate texts. To be most effective, meaning-focused input must provide learners with an authentic reading experience, as described at the beginning of this article. This involves not only level-appropriate materials, but also material that engages learners’ interest and imagination.

There are many ways to keep learners focused on meaning. One way is to establish a reading goal. When you read a text in your native language, you usually have a goal in mind—learning new information, for example. Research makes it clear how important the establishment of a goal is to developing reading comprehension in both first and second language readers. (Koda, 2004) If students are given a meaning-focused goal such as learning how to do something, applying something they have just learned to a new situation, or explaining something they have learned to a partner, this keeps their attention clearly focused on the meaning of what they have read.

Another way to keep learners focused on meaning is to create exercises that direct students to find and analyze the content of a text. This gives students practice in reading for main ideas and details, for example, but does so in a more authentic way than by just having students answer questions to find out if they have understood. To illustrate how goals and exercises can be designed to provide meaning-focused learning opportunities, let us take a look at some exercises from Real Reading 2 (Wiese, 2011). In one of the reading texts from a unit on music, learners read about a relatively rare condition called amusia, a topic which most readers are unlikely to be familiar with. The text is expository, and the reading goal is explicitly stated:

“To understand who amusics are and why they can’t appreciate music.”
This goal focuses readers’ attention squarely on content. Note that although students will need to identify the main idea and important details in the text to achieve the objective, practicing these reading skills is merely the means to a meaning-focused end.

The first reading exercise after the text is a multiple choice gap-fill exercise, and again, the focus is on content; as learners complete the exercise, they are not only checking their comprehension. They are building a definition of an amusic.

1. Amusic people are a. uncommon b. young c. unable to be happy.
2. Amusics can’t ________________ a. go to parties b. enjoy music c. understand their condition.

The final exercise is one that requires learners to apply what they have learned about amusics to a communicative task: designing a television advertisement for a medicine that helps amusic people enjoy music. To complete the task, students need to both understand what an amusic is (meaning focused-input) and communicate a content-based message. This communication belongs to the next strand of learning: meaning-focused output.

**Meaning-Focused Output**

Meaning-focused output requires learners to produce language, but they need to produce the language with the purpose of genuinely communicating messages. To select these types of activities, consider why and how you might talk or write about something you have read. Taking part in communication activities can provide both meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output (one person’s output is another person’s input). Responding to the content of a text either orally or in writing while also using target vocabulary encountered in the text is one example of meaning-focused output. Activities involving meaning-focused output take students beyond a mere comprehension check to an analysis, discussion, or application of actual content, as in the example above.

**Language-Focused Learning**

Language-focused learning involves a deliberate focus on language features such as pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, strategies, and text structure. From a reading perspective, these include instruction and practice in reading skills such as predicting, skimming, scanning, and making inferences. From a vocabulary perspective, these include deliberately learning vocabulary through the use of word cards, completing vocabulary activities, doing intensive reading where there is some focus on vocabulary, and being taught vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies by the teacher.

Language-focused learning is most effective when it is practiced with the same content that is used for the meaning-focused learning strand of the course. Research suggests that texts created solely for the purpose of teaching language and strategy use are less effective. (Grabe, 2009). Tasks involving language-focused learning should be designed to accompany texts that provide learners with an authentic reading experience. Thus, the reading text itself should drive the choice of strategies and skills to be presented and practiced, rather than the other way around.

**Fluency**

Fluency development involves learners making the best use of what they already know. This means that fluency development activities should not involve any new vocabulary or grammar and should involve largely familiar content. In a reading course, the purpose of such activities is for learners to become faster, more fluent readers. Establishing an extensive reading program in which students have access to texts at or below their level of proficiency is one of the best ways to help readers achieve fluency.
Another way of helping students to develop reading fluency is by having them reread a text that they have already read and worked through intensively. Providing learners with opportunities to record their reading speed and improve it when rereading is also helpful, as measuring progress is quite motivating for many learners. Finally, students can be taught fluency strategies that they can apply to both their extensive and intensive reading. However, it should be noted that learning such strategies falls within the language-focused learning strand.

Conclusion
It is important that research on language learning and second language acquisition finds its way into teaching and learning. In this article, we have discussed ways in which teachers can apply what has been learned from research to their selection of materials and activities for the reading classroom. We argue that in order for second and foreign learners to become proficient readers in English, they need access to texts that make it possible for them to respond in an authentic way to what they have read. We then discuss the importance of choosing reading course materials that provide language learners with a balance of learning opportunities in the four strands: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency.

References

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