

論文：

Why Not Use Graded Readers as Literature in the EFL Classroom?

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Abstract:

There is a great deal of agreement on the use of reading in foreign language (FL) classes. However, exactly what should be read is not agreed upon. Some teachers want to use “authentic” FL texts, while others use simplified texts such as graded readers (GR). There is a bias against simplified texts as being too simple and not representative of “authentic” language. This paper looks at FL student anxiety and performance and asks why are GRs not considered authentic?

Keywords: graded readers, literature, reading anxiety, student attitudes, interpretation

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There is a lot of hand wringing over evidence that all around the world people just are not reading as much as they used to (Mori, 2015; Habegger-Conti, 2015; Crain, 2018; Ingraham, 2016; NEA, 2019). Whether it is watching television or playing video/computer games, people of all ages do seem to be reading less. But reading has been shown to improve language skills, in L1 study situations, but also in L2 or foreign language (FL) learning situations. For example, automaticity, or automatic word recognition, is necessary for reading in L1 or L2 (Gillis-Furutaka, 2015). Japanese engineering students who did a 15-week reading program felt the reading had improved their English (Hagley, 2017). Dutch high school students saw reading literature as improving their language skills (Bloemert et al., 2019).

But what should teachers use in the FL classroom for students to read? Study after study show students studying FL suffer from foreign language reading anxiety (FLRA) (Yamashita, 2013; Wilany & Dewi, 2017; Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017). O’Sullivan (1991) suggests different solutions for using literary texts in the classroom:

- simplified texts
- excerpts
- simple native texts.

However, she points out that “(s)implification is not

generally favored because of its reduction process. The original book is shortened in characters, situations and events, the vocabulary is restricted, and the structures are controlled” (O’Sullivan, 1991).

Yet, despite the ample evidence that students suffer from FLRA, there is a bias in FL classes that “authentic” literary texts, are the best, if not the only, materials to use. “Graded readers and simplified texts are sometimes confused with literature. In fact, they are adapted and shortened, one may even venture to say commercialized, versions of authentic texts. They should be considered teaching materials rather than literature” (Narancic-Kovac & Kaltenbacher, 2006). “A literary text that has not been adapted, abridged or transformed for particular reasons represent authentic textual material” (Ibragimova et al., 2017).

Zacharias (2005) points out that while literature develops students’ motivation and cognitive and affective dimensions, accessibility is important. Texts should be within students’ competence. Aparna (2013) states “(i)f a text is very difficult on linguistic level ... then the entire exercise would be futile as it will not generate interest or inclination to learn among the students.” Nation (1991) says “(s)peed reading and extensive reading (ER) of graded readers (GR) provide fluency improvement through the features of limited demands because of language control, and quantity of processing.” In fact, study after study shows that simplified texts such as GRs

benefit FL learners (Gillis-Furutaka, 2015; Yamashita, 2013; Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017; Hagley, 2017; Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007; Young Park et al., 2017; Swanson & Collett, 2016; Iwahori, 2008; Takahashi & Umino, 2016; Manara, 2019; Peel, 2015). Why this bias against using them in favor of “authentic” FL materials?

Ibragimova et al. (2017) give a rather technical rationale for an unadapted text. “A broad definition explains a text as a whole communicative unit that has a structural-semantic, functional and compositional and stylistic unity...” In other words, literature is characterized by special language and structure. “Literary texts are often rich in multiple layers of meaning, and can be effectively mined for discussions and sharing feelings or opinions” (Clandfield & Duncan, 2004). Rezanejad et al. (2015) believe that students who study literature learn to use language “and how to use it differently.” “[L]iterary texts include various language norms” (Ibragimova et al., 2017).

However, literature is not just its language. Schwarz (2008) states: “Non-fiction helps us know; imaginative literature- fiction, poetry, and drama- helps us understand both ourselves and the world beyond ourselves.” Surendra (2018) tells us: “(w)hen we read, we learn to look between the lines. We learn to find symbols, make connections, find themes, learn about characters.” So, there is an imaginative quality to literature, an element of interpretation. As Schwarz says in his 2008 book, *In Defense of Reading*,

“(f)or reading is a process of cognition that depends on actively organizing the phenomena of language both in the moment of perception and in the fuller understanding that develops as our reading continues as well as in our retrospective view of our completed reading.”

According to Mustofa and Hill (2018), “(i)t is not enough to just memorize the words when reading; to understand and appreciate literature, the reader must be able to interpret the words.”

This goes back to the criticism of GRs. The language, having been simplified, has been stripped not just of its literary quality, - its beauty, its uniqueness, - it has been stripped of its imaginative quality, its very creativity. And there is something to this criticism. Swanson and Collett (2016) found that while using GRs enabled students to increase their reading speed, they sacrificed comprehension. Crossley and McNamara

(2016) on the other hand observed students who read GRs experienced improved text comprehension but were not able to make inferences about the GR text.

But as Nation (1991) points out, simplified texts “provide fluency improvement” by virtue of being simplified. “This shows that graded reading can provide a reliable basis for systematic coverage of vocabulary for fluency development.” And in fact, Crossley and McNamara (2016) ultimately showed that reading simplified texts did benefit the students. Allan (2016) analyzed GRs and found that GRs “appear to contain similar lexical bundles to those found in authentic fiction.”

Which brings us back to Schwarz’s statement cited earlier. He does not say “only great literary fiction helps us to understand.” He says “imaginative literature-fiction, poetry, and drama.” I will not address poetry, but fiction and drama are both well represented among GRs. Stoller (2015) makes the point,

“L2 students who read too little, as well as those who must read too many overly difficult texts, find it challenging to become skilled, motivated readers. If reading improvement is truly an instructional goal, then students should be engaged in as much comprehensible reading as possible, in and out of class, and across the curriculum.”

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