

# An ESOL Class Library and Its Application to the Oral Conversation Class

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In the October 1986 issue of the *TESOL Newsletter*, Shanefield described how, in the university town of Princeton, the public library in conjunction with Princeton Adult School recognized the necessity of setting up an ESOL reading section. After reading this article, I felt that such a program would benefit my Japanese students majoring in English in a junior college in Okayama.

The following article discusses the setting up of an ESOL library in this same junior college and the reasons supporting such an expenditure. It further discusses the selection of graded readers, their introduction to students and various activities for incorporating them into the curriculum.

## ***What Are Graded Readers And Why Use Them***

Graded readers are "short books of fiction and non-fiction which are graded structurally and lexically...from beginner to advanced [levels] ...using only the grammatical structures and vocabulary items appropriate to that level of study" (Bamford, 1984, p. 218). They are to ESOL what adolescent literature is to young people in their native tongue: "a bridge [which] keeps students from falling into a river of too difficult vocabulary, too complex syntax.... [It] supplies experiences that increase confidence and develop abilities" (Nugent, 1984, p. 35). Such reading material, then, not only reduces frustration but, since these books are relatively short, they can actually provide a built-in source of motivation that comes with the accomplishment of a task. This aspect of motivation cannot be too highly regarded in the area of foreign language learning especially in a country like Japan where the majority of students will rarely find opportunities to use English.

For most Japanese wanting to improve their English, then, graded readers provide this opportunity. They are an inexpensive "foreign teacher" that can be practiced with at any free moment, who never runs out of topics of conversation, whose vocabulary and syntax change frequently, and whose dialogue is natural and not so formalized as in many language text

books where responses are given very often in full sentences. In books, as in real life, characters are different and express themselves differently according to such factors as situation, experience, purpose. Like L1, L2 reading develops one's capacity for independent learning and promotes appreciative understanding of others' experiences (Fillion, 1981). It is worthwhile to note here that even in the field of English for specific purposes, relaxed reading in speciality areas is being encouraged (van Naerssen, 1985). Some of the reasons cited coincide with the reasons for using graded readers: "it promotes second language acquisition by providing appropriate input under favorable conditions; it provides exposure to general English; it helps to develop a strategy for learning English that students can carry with them after they leave a program; there is evidence [studies cited] that extensive, free reading on a regular basis does have a positive influence on second/foreign language acquisition" (p.1,6).

Whatever the reasons for reading might be--pleasure, relaxation, improvement of English or acquiring information--graded readers by encompassing all of them fulfill the conditions for turning reluctant readers in second language learning into sustained readers (Schweitz,1985). In a paper by Shimane, (1984), eight Japanese subjects were questioned about their individual learning style in English. The most fluent of the eight attributed his success in English mainly to daily reading, a practice which has continued now for 20 years.

While being convinced of the benefits of L2 reading, as teachers we must also be aware of the problems facing our students when confronted by a book not in their native tongue and dealing with information not within their cultural background. It is this background knowledge which needs to be addressed more than it has been, as recent research has pointed out its importance in reading comprehension (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). Johnson (1981), in researching the language complexity and cultural background of a text, found that for ESL learners their reading comprehension was less affected by the level of language complexity than by the cultural background of the text. In other words, if ESL readers are given a passage from their cultural background to read, language simplification is not a factor for understanding. But if the material deals with a cultural background foreign to theirs, then simplification aids comprehension.

Learning to read in L2 does differ in ways from learning to read in L1. Block (1986) has stated:

When people learn to read in a second language, they need only be concerned with understanding specific language features in print. Just as second language learners bring with them their knowledge of language in general and then apply this knowledge to learning the specific features of another language, so readers of the

second language seem to bring with them their knowledge of the reading process and of approaches to tasks and then apply these to specific language features in the text. Thus, the development of strategy use, particularly as it is applied to informative text, does not seem to depend on language-specific features. (p. 485)

Investigating the comprehension strategies of second language readers, Block further pointed out that "ESL readers did not appear to use strategies or patterns of strategies that were different from those of native speakers of English" (p. 485).

If then certain aspects of reading readiness are already present and the importance of background knowledge is admitted as central to the understanding of a text, what can we as teachers do to prepare students to understand material which is not part of their reading content schemata, i.e., material acquired from past experiences and stored in memory. Quoting Coady (1979, p. 7):

Background knowledge becomes an important variable when we notice, as many have, that students with a Western background of some kind learn English faster, on the average, than those without such a background.

Carrell and Eisterhold (1983, pp. 566-567) suggest ways to avoid having the students read material without prior preparation:

a) *The Language Experience Approach:*

This approach virtually eliminates the unfamiliar content schemata because the students themselves write their own beginning reading material with the teacher's assistance.

b) *Krashen's Narrow Reading Approach:*

Here the student's reading material is limited by topic or author. In this way vocabulary repetition and writing style become familiar to the student and comprehension increases.

c) *The Local Setting Approach:*

The material used here--newspapers, travel brochures, etc.--all deal with places and people and events familiar to the student.

d) *Sustained Silent Reading:*

The important factor in this approach is to have students select their own materials for extensive reading.

As for actual classroom exercises, Aron (1986) adapts Pearson and Johnson's L1 reading tasks to L2 reading in order to build appropriate schemata. Suggestions include using comparisons of known to unknown, sequencing activities, establishing cause/effect relationships and assigning written or oral paraphrase summaries. This last activity, paraphrase, is

recommended by several authors (Schlicher, 1983; Carrell, 1984; Block, 1986; Walker, 1987) as a means of helping both student and teacher realize what is not correctly understood.

Ideally perhaps it is more beneficial to choose reading texts from the student's own cultural background especially if testing is to be carried out for just how dependable are the results if culture is the barrier to understanding and not language per se? However, with regard to extensive reading, this problem can be reduced by having the student actively involved in the reading selection; interest and curiosity will presuppose some prior knowledge of the choice since, not surprisingly, publishers' lists include an abundance of titles from the L2 culture.

The remainder of this paper will investigate some criteria for selecting books, procedures for introducing them to students and various follow-up activities.

### *Selecting and Introducing Graded Readers*

In preparation for setting up an ESOL class library, form letters were sent to publishers requesting their catalogue of graded readers. This method can result in a hit and miss selection since the actual perusal of books would facilitate a more accurate purchase with regard to level, attractiveness and content. In addition, the selection would be better made, this writer feels, if done by more than one individual to ensure a greater variety of topics available to the students.

Beckman's criteria (1984) for helping reluctant readers in L1 should be considered when selecting ESOL readers as well. Recommended are books whose story line begins immediately and only have characters that are necessary to the action. These two features plus a generous use of fast-paced dialogue involve the reader quickly and advance the story. Books which are thin and/or have numbered chapters are an additional asset since students can finish them quickly and note their progress.

Picture books not only stimulate interest and render the book more attractive but can be used to point out cultural differences. A book with a corresponding text/picture story line is doubly helpful to students who can use the visual to aid comprehension. Although such books might seem to belittle the maturity level of the student, they do provide beginning development of language skills and, since the student is free to read any book, including these may be necessary for some students before they feel confident to go to a different level.

An important contribution to the task of selecting graded readers without the benefit of direct contact with the books has been made by Bamford (1984). His annotated list is arranged according to level and publisher; it also gives a popularity rating for most books

done by young adult students in general English courses in Japan. As Bamford points out the annotations were based on students' comments and his own evaluation. Such a list is a valuable resource to ensure an initial stock of worthwhile ESOL books.

So far this paper has been concerned with the criteria for selecting graded readers. More advanced students should be challenged to read or might wish to read unadapted books but these too should be carefully chosen especially with reference to schema theory. Brown (1985) has noted that writers from developing countries or countries with a high rate of illiteracy or sparse population take into consideration that their cultural background will not be familiar to readers and therefore compensate for this by making their works more universally appealing. In the process of compiling an annotated list of unadapted readers for ESL/EFL students, Brown uses the following guidelines (p. 7):

1. Books should normally not exceed 300 pages, though occasional exceptions can be made.
2. Books should contain little or no nonstandard English, jargon, patois, or pidgin.
3. Books should contain nothing offensive to any race or group of people.
4. Books should hold the reader's interest.
5. Books should be written in the twentieth century.

With regard to the students' being introduced to graded readers, the individual selection of books must be considered. Therefore, a local bookstore was contacted and asked to order a selection of graded readers (Bamford's list was used) to be set up in the school on a scheduled date during orientation week. Prior to attending the book fair, the students were each given catalogues supplied by the two publishers Heinemann and Longman in order to get a general idea of what types of books would be available for purchase. (Other publishing companies were also represented at the book fair.) Handouts explaining what graded readers are and their use in the curriculum were also distributed. The students, then, were alerted to the fact that they were responsible for reading and reporting on two books a month, that the school had a library of readers also available to them, and that they should be prepared to exchange books with fellow students to ensure a greater supply and variety. This last fact was deemed important so that they would purchase different books from those their friends might select. It was also suggested that as they finish their own books, they lend them to the library for use by others in different classes.

## **Setting Up An ESOL Library**

Because first-year students in a junior college carry a heavy class load, the ESOL library was set up in the same classroom as that used by them with the author. This was done not only to give them browsing time before and after class but also to facilitate the borrowing and returning of books as they were not part of the school library but belonged to the English department.

Following Shanefield's advice (1986), there are two separate filing systems, one alphabetically by title and the other by level. The books were shelved as well by level according to the publishers' guidelines using the terms basic, elementary, low-intermediate, high-intermediate and advanced. Heinemann's catalogue also color codes the books and this was adapted with slight modification. The inside back flap of each book was marked with the appropriate color in order to ensure that the book be returned to the proper level on the colorcoded shelf (basic = orange; elementary = green; low-intermediate = pink; high-intermediate = red; advanced = blue).

On the shelves the books were not arranged in any particular order nor were they displayed according to the recommendation in Nuttall (1982, pp. 175-177) because of limited space. This is definitely a disadvantage since it means taking each book down to identify it as the books are too thin to have the title displayed on the spine. However during the book fair the readers were displayed attractively to capitalize on the student's initial interest.

All of the above demands a great deal of time and assistance, in this case received from the department secretary who printed out a book slip and two file cards for over 100 books. When the new order of books arrived, each student was given a book, a book slip and two file cards to fill out taking only 5 minutes of class time and serving to instruct them on what to do when they lend their own books to the library. (In that case, the student's name and class number were also written on both the book and the file cards.)

Once the library is set up and in operation, an occasional check to replace or order new titles and the planning of a book fair for incoming students is all the teacher need be involved with. The actual logistics of running it can efficiently be left to class librarians.

### ***Suggested Activities For Use With Graded Readers***

Since using graded readers was a new experience for me, some indication of its

effectiveness on students' attitudes toward reading English was sought. To that end a questionnaire was administered and answered anonymously but with some type of marking that would be remembered by each student in order to answer other questionnaires at the mid and end points of the term and enable the teacher to compare them. To ensure that the questions were understood, they were written in both English and Japanese. The following is an adaptation of Stadnychenko's questionnaire (1981):

1. Do you like to read books in Japanese:  
 a. yes  
 b. a little  
 c. not very much
2. Do you like to read books in English:  
 a. yes  
 b. a little  
 c. not very much
3. Do you read Japanese books:  
 a. very often  
 b. sometimes  
 c. seldom  
 d. almost never  
 e. never
4. Do you read English books:  
 a. very often  
 b. sometimes  
 c. seldom  
 d. almost never  
 e. never
5. Do you prefer books of:  
 a. fiction  
 b. non-fiction
6. Which types of fiction appeal to you most:  
 historical novel                       science fiction  
 adventure                               romance  
 nature stories                          mysteries  
 fantasy                                     detective

\_\_\_ stories about people your own age

\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

7. What type of non-fiction appeals to you most?
8. What was the last really good book in Japanese you read and liked?
9. What was the last really good book in English you read and liked?
10. Do you have a favorite magazine?  
\_\_\_ yes - Title \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_ no
11. What type of magazine article interests you most?
12. What is your favorite section of the newspaper?
13. Is there any book, short story, play or poem that you have read that you would recommend to others?  
Title:
14. How many books in Japanese did you read this past March?
15. What are you reading at present?
16. About how much time do you spend reading in a week?

Although there are many exercises that a student may do *after* reading a book, it was decided to use one that involves the student during the process of reading. It might be considered more of an intensive than extensive reading type activity but it does guide the student to understand what is read and to "make sense of the text for himself" (Nuttall, 1982, p. 147). It is a combination of a few methods (Henry, 1984; Walker, 1987; Youngblood, 1985) and its main component is the reading journal. Like the dialogue journal, the reading journal is a record of a person's thoughts, feelings, ideas, questions and reactions generated by reading and clarified by writing.

Perhaps it would be better to first say what the reading journal is not. It is not a plot outline and this must be made clear to the students if they are to do more than simply record the events of the story. In the reading journal, there are no right or wrong answers which fact helps to eliminate seeing the book as a means to test memory by detailed questions or to concentrate on vocabulary definitions and the correct understanding of each word instead of overall comprehension. It is not even an exercise which demands answers for it encourages the asking of questions and the realization that there are not always answers.

Youngblood, after using reading journals with all levels of students in L1 for six years, stated that it is "one of the best ways I have found to get students ... involved in reading, thinking and discussing" (p. 47). He gives his students the same advice he received when

having to keep a journal: be truthful, thoughtful and thorough.

In considering its use with graded readers, it was felt that more structure was necessary for L2 students and so the following form sheet (based on Walker, 1987 and Henry, 1984) was prepared for the students to fill out before actually beginning to read a book:

Title of Book: \_\_\_\_\_

Facts or questions about the title:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Cover Illustration:

Facts or questions:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

Facts or questions:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

First Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_

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Facts or questions:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Information on the Back Cover:

Facts or questions:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Type of Book: \_\_\_\_\_

Why did you choose this book to read? \_\_\_\_\_

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Needless to say, certain questions are easier to answer with particular types of books. The student doesn't have to answer all of them or fill in all the spaces provided; all that must be done is to be aware of what is already known and be interested in what is coming. This "interest and background knowledge will enable the student to comprehend at a reasonable rate and keep him involved in the material in spite of its syntactic difficulty. The benefit of such reading will be twofold: confidence in oneself and exposure to the very syntactic patterns which must be learned" (Coady, 1979, p. 12).

It should be pointed out that all of this is done outside of class time although one class period was taken to demonstrate how to fill out both the form sheet and the reading journal. The book chosen for this exercise and shown on the overhead projector was an unadapted version of Robert C. O'Brien's *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, retitled as *The Secret of NIMH*. The class was put into groups of three and filled in the form sheet first together then as a class discussing what other groups had done. For the reading journal, a few sample entries from the teacher's own were distributed. These entries recorded responses in full sentences, questions or simply one or two words. The date is recorded at the beginning of each new entry and the reader's response to a particular passage is written immediately so as not to be forgotten.

Youngblood gives the following list of suggested sentence lead ins which is kept on the inside back cover of the reading journal for handy reference (p. 48):

1. I wonder what this means....
2. I really don't understand this part because....
3. I really like/dislike this idea because....
4. This character reminds me of somebody I know because....
5. This character reminds me of myself because....
6. This character is like [name of character] in [title of work] because....

7. I think this setting is important because....
8. This scene reminds me of a similar scene in [title of work] because....
9. This part is very realistic/unrealistic because....
10. I like/dislike this writing because....
11. This section makes me think about/because....
12. This section is particularly effective because....
13. I think the relationship between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ is interesting because....
14. The ideas here remind me of the ideas in [title of work] because....
15. I like/dislike [name of character] because....
16. This situation reminds me of a similar situation in my own life. It happened when....
17. The character I most admire is \_\_\_\_\_ because....
18. If I were [name of character] at this point, I would....

When the book has been completed, the student writes a one-word reaction to the story and rates it on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). The last activity is to fill out a 3x5 index card (Beckman, 1984, p. 86) with the student's name, book title and author, the one-word reaction and their brief comments on the book. These cards will then be displayed for fellow students to read and put in the card file for future use by others seeking good books.

The journal is read by the teacher who makes appropriate comments on the entries. For this reason, it is advisable to have two reading journals, one to work in when the other is handed in. As far as grading is concerned, these reading assignments should constitute a portion of the final mark since it is human nature (or student nature) to do what is required and not to spend too much time on what is not.

Another way to advertize books would be to follow Bilby's suggestion (1981) and put students into groups of five. Each person brings to class the best book they have read in the past few months and gives a five-minute presentation to the other four members about the book and why they too might enjoy it. The members then ask questions of the presenter to determine whether or not the book would interest each personally.

In whatever way graded readers are used, it is hoped that they will lay the foundation for further reading in the second language and eventually lead to reading unadapted books. For people who have put years of study into learning a language, such a goal is certainly rewarding, pleasurable and within their grasp.

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