The odd couple: reading and vocabulary

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This article explores the tensions between reading and vocabulary instruction through the metaphor of the odd couple: two unique individuals whose characteristics are quite disparate yet who find themselves living together. While there are mutual benefits from the arrangement of cohabitation, nevertheless the two unavoidably clash with each other. Reading and vocabulary are just such an odd couple. Reading instruction methods for intermediate and advanced levels encourage students of a second language to cope with unedited texts. But the lexicon in authentic selections includes so many new words that students can feel frustrated. Still, the demands of the two must be accommodated. With the teacher who makes use of unedited reading selections particularly in mind, the article offers suggestions for facilitating the successful meshing of reading and vocabulary skill practice.

Background

Many English-language teachers have experienced the pull between reading and vocabulary instruction. My own critical incident occurred quite a few years ago. I was the instructor of an academic English course for international students at the University of Southern California. My students, primarily social science majors, concurrently took courses in their major fields. They were dismayed by the length of the reading assignments in their other classes. To help them cope with authentic, unedited texts, I had put together a packet of selections drawn from their social science textbooks, with the objective of giving them practice in mature reading strategies.

We had just finished a passage from a social psychology textbook that dealt with coercion. They were fascinated with the author's reference to the case of Patty Hearst, the heiress who was kidnapped by political extremists. While she was held as a prisoner by them, her abductors had tried to alter Patty Hearst's attitudes to her family and social background: they had used coercion or brainwashing.

Realizing that my students were caught up with a real-life drama which illustrated a textbook term, I went to work to find other reading selections about Patty Hearst. The next day, I brought in an article about the case from a weekly news magazine. Actually, it was a book review of a prominent woman journalist's account of the story (Alexander 1979). But my students, although at first they had been eager to learn more about Patty Hearst, grumbled when they tried to read the photocopied article. Surprised and disappointed, I had thought that their curiosity and interest in knowing more about a famous court case would help them overcome whatever language and lexis problems the article might contain. When I asked them why the article was difficult to read, they replied: 'too many new words'.
dipped into the research literature on the topic. I quickly discovered that experts who study mother-tongue vocabulary acquisition and transfer strongly advise that vocabulary-learning and reading are complementary activities, since the learning of new words is aided by contextual reinforcement (see Sernberg 1987). Despite the delicate problems in bringing reading and vocabulary together, there appear to be sound reasons for trying to integrate them in our instructional plans. Rather than dealing with them separately, we should look for the most effective methods to combine them.

I have adopted some guidelines for making decisions about vocabulary matters as they come up in preparing authentic texts for our reading lessons. These suggestions can be applied, as well, by teachers who focus on using authentic material to augment the coursework with reading selections which have appeal for a specific group of learners.

My first step in preparing authentic materials for use as reading/vocabulary practice is to scrutinize the text selected very carefully. It often requires many readings to discover all of the items which may present difficulties for ESL learners. I use a coloured pen to mark ‘suspicious’ candidates: words which are repeated, words which contain concepts central to the overall meaning of the selection, words which are likely to lead learners down blind alleys because they refer to meanings outside the subject-matter at hand.

Analysing the text for its important features, such as organisation, connections between paragraphs and sentences, and placement of main and supporting ideas is also a vital first step. In order to get an idea of what I want to focus on, I have found it helpful to use at least two copies of the text when doing the analysis. On one I mark items which will become the vocabulary part of the lesson, on the other I indicate paragraphs which contain rhetorical or other interesting textual features I may want to incorporate in the lesson.

In order to achieve a balance between reading and vocabulary interests, it helps if I take an ‘unanalysed’ attitude towards vocabulary. The objective to keep in mind is for students to grasp meanings of words and expressions so that they will be able to understand the reading at hand. To reach that objective, I concentrate on the meaning which a word has in the particular selection. True, words have multiple meanings; they can be used in various syntactic patterns; they occur with various morphological prefixes and suffixes. Indeed, our knowledge about how words work is vast and complicated. But extending the range of information about a word too far from the context in which it is used in the text the students are reading is the delicate balance between reading and vocabulary matters. For example, introducing word-building exercises such as synonym and antonym drills works against this state of equilibrium, because such exercises usually take learners quite far from the context which the writer has tried to establish.

The careful, multiple readings of the text which I first undertake probably reveal a few words, perhaps as many as half-a-dozen, which are crucial for understanding the writer’s main ideas. These key words must be already familiar to the students. If they aren’t, I explain them prior to their reading the selection. Often, key words contain paraphrase expressions, words and phrases which carry similar meaning in the context of the selection. For example, the following words were noted as ‘key expressions’ in a particular...
text: 'aim', 'goal', 'objective', 'end', 'target' (Dubin and Olahata 1981: 35).

Such configurations of vocabulary appear to be a natural result of the
convention in written English which advises us not to repeat the same word
within a sentence, if possible within an entire paragraph. The good writer's
word search yields a variety of items. Unfortunately, this stylistic charac-
teristic of written English creates reading difficulties for the L2 learner.

Find candidates for quick glossing

From the careful analysis of the text, I find that usually I mark a fair number
of words as 'suspicious'. I guess that my students don't know them; I wonder
if their occurrence will cause problems. To qualify as a candidate for quick
glossing, a word should not convey a meaning which is central to the passage.
Since it is usually too large an order for students to 'learn' all of the unfamiliar
vocabulary items in a selection, I facilitate their reading by glossing idio-
syncratic words, those which do not contain key meanings. The gloss, or
definition, is limited to the meaning of the word in which it is used in the
passage. (If learners and teacher share the same language background, the
definition can be given in their L1.) Often, candidates for glossing are those
words and expressions which a writer used to bring liveliness and verve to
the text, particularly in journalistic writing. While my teacher-instructor tend
to push me towards giving learners explanations about all of these zesty
items, I try to exercise restraint. Students are always grateful to receive quick
definitions of troubleshooting vocabulary items; I feel that my responsibility lies in
providing glosses which themselves do not present new puzzles.

Point out odd friends

Developing word-sensitivity should be an important goal in instructional
plans which merge reading and vocabulary work. This objective is served by
alerting students to words that have occurred previously in reading pass-
ages reappear. I resist, as much as possible, the tendency to emphasize text-
students' recognition of vocabulary items that have appeared before in
reading selections. Certainly, tests have their place. However, in order to
foster in learners an attitude of discovery about words, I keep testing to a
minimum. The goal should be for students to enjoy the process of meeting up
with words which they have already come across. In that way, words become
familiar friends.

Guess with caution

While there are well-developed theories about the psycholinguistic nature of
the reading process, which point to the role of guessing from context as a
strategy which readers employ, there is one in their first language (e.g. Eskey 1986),
as a classroom teaching technique in second-language reading, advice about
guessing should, in my view, be offered to students with caution. I always
test out a word's guessability myself before suggesting to students
that they can easily grasp the meaning of words from clues in the context.
Then, I point to the clues to the students. If the clue is language-based, for
example if it is the position of the word in the sentence or the morphological
ending on the word, guessing may work. More often than not, the clues may
be dependent upon the meaning of other words or phrases in the immediate
context, a far more difficult guessing game.

Read in depth

When I gave my ESL students an article to read about Patty Hearst because
they were already familiar with the idea of coercion from their previous reading
assignment, I was utilizing the technique of 'reading in depth', or reading about
the same content in other publications. Similarly, sound-language courses
which make use of thematic units as a way to organize reading and

writing skill practice utilize 'reading in depth'. The idea behind the principle is
that it is easier to read with understanding if one already has previous
knowledge of and experience with a topic. My plan for giving my students
in itself, perfectly sound and followed the concept of 'reading in depth'.
What material. In giving them a new magazine selection, I was thrusting
them social science textbook.

Chall (1977) has noted the distinction for children that in their first lan-
guage between understanding the meaning and understanding the message.
A youngster may know a word and still be in the process of learning to read
it in print. The distinction, though not quite the same way, exists also
with adult second-language learners who understand the concept in their
own language, but do not recognize or know the words or expressions for it in
English. An important aspect of teaching reading and writing comes about
in second-language instruction when the teacher helps the learner connect a
known concept with words in print in English. The linkage comes about in
myriad ways. In fact, discovering these ways is for me a good part of the
explanation of English language teaching and learning.

As was the case with Neil Simon's play (The Odd Couple, 1966), reading and
vocabulary, the ESL odd couple, can each benefit from a period of living
together despite their seemingly incompatible natures. In fact, they may
even end up, as Simon's characters did, 

References


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