

# The odd couple: reading and vocabulary

Fraida Dubin

(8 suggestions when choosing texts for reading class)

*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.*

audience  
purpose

## 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'.

author's exp  
teaching reading

problem  
vocab  
frustrated  
interest

Later, I looked more carefully at the news magazine review. I found expressions such as: 'a contortion of reality', 'the quintessential news story', 'tabloid journalism', and 'pseudo family'. I wondered if part of my students' frustration with the article was because these phrases contained one straightforward word which they most likely knew, but it was in combination with another unfamiliar phrase. For example, they know the word 'journalism', but 'tabloid' was baffling. They realized that the words together contained an overall twist of meaning. Moreover, the article was heavily sprinkled with items that required readers to possess considerable background knowledge beyond the Patty Hearst story itself: 'Tower of Babel', 'Rosetta Stone', 'a Robin Hood ransom', 'jabberwocky time'. Too late! I realized I had overlooked my students' vocabulary needs as I rushed in to capitalize on their interest in the subject matter.

new phrases of familiar words + unfamiliar

**The tug between reading and vocabulary**

Students such as those in my university ESL course need to have highly developed reading skills to keep up with their academic work. Intermediate and advanced ESL courses in many post-secondary institutions, therefore, emphasize the teaching of reading strategies by means of original selections. No matter what reading habits students may have in their native language, they must learn to read rapidly in English with understanding. Course materials often stress 'good reader' techniques such as looking for main ideas; comprehending whole phrases, sentences, even paragraphs rather than reading word for word; and making use of titles and sub-headings to aid understanding. In addition, reading teachers often try to coax students to leave their dictionaries closed, giving them the advice to use contextual clues as a way to guess word meanings.

context-heavy = bad

context of density on fluency

At the same time, in order to read authentic selections learners of a second language need very well developed vocabularies. An estimate of the number of different word meanings appearing in the materials which native children use in 12 years of public schooling puts that number at approximately 100,000 (Nagy and Anderson 1984). Consider that ELT course books at an advanced level utilize word lists around 4,000 to 5,000. Thus, there is a formidable leap from the controlled vocabulary in materials designed for new learners into texts which assume native competence in their readers.

vocab also important

Resist excess word-work

When they realize the size of the vocabulary gap between language course books and selections from authentic texts, some English language teachers attempt to concentrate on vocabulary exclusively. However, many ESL students do not have time to undertake separate vocabulary-building courses. Further, teaching vocabulary items which are not embedded in some meaningful context, such as a stretch of text, doesn't seem to help learners. A plan in widespread use is the comprehensive course which combines reading and writing, with attention to vocabulary as time constraints permit. Often, the reading and writing activities are organized around thematic units which provide a kind of semantic glue. Courses built on learners' specific purposes (ESP), in theory at least, also provide built-in subject areas for drawing on authentic reading selections, but the issue of learning new lexis still exists. Naturally, there are apt to be more occurrences of the same or related 'new words' in texts which treat similar subject matter.

controlled authentic texts

Present vocabulary before reading

While coursebooks organize and structure language items for new learners, when we utilize unedited selections, particularly those taken from popular, journalistic sources, we must cope with word lists which are apt to be quite disorganized (see Cairns and Redman 1986). Yet in our native language we seem to acquire new vocabulary through reading. In fact, when I

Teaching vocabulary through unedited texts

Analyse the text

dipped into the research literature on the topic, I quickly discovered that experts who study mother-tongue vocabulary acquisition among children strongly advise that vocabulary-learning and reading are complementary activities, since the learning of new words is aided by contextual reinforcement (see Sternberg 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.

typically complementary combine reading & vocab

I have adopted some guidelines for making decisions about vocabulary matters as they come up in treating authentic texts for use in reading lessons. These suggestions can be applied, as well, by teachers who find it effective to augment the coursebook 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 L2 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.

guidelines & suggestions (for teacher)

Analysing the text for its other important features such as organization, connections between paragraphs and sentences, and placement of main and supporting ideas is also a vital first step. In order to gain a view of what I may 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 passages which contain rhetorical or other interesting textual features I may want to incorporate in the lesson.

check vocab & organization

In order to achieve a balance between reading and vocabulary interests, it helps if I take an 'unzealous' 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 tilts 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 expressions usually take learners quite far from the context which the writer has tried to establish.

limit to meaning-in-context

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 quite 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

read 1st to check vocab

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text: 'aim', 'goal', 'objective', 'end', 'target' (Dubin and Olshtain 1981:95). 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 characteristic of written English creates reading difficulties for the L2 learner.

④  
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 idiosyncratic 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 utilized to bring liveliness and verve to the text, particularly in journalistic writing. While my teacher-instincts 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 troubling vocabulary items; I feel that my responsibility lies in providing glosses which themselves do not present new puzzles.

⑤  
Point out old 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 when words that have occurred previously in reading passages reappear. I resist, as much as possible, the tendency to emphasize testing 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.

⑥  
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 in their first language (e.g. Eskey 1986), as a classroom teaching technique in second-language reading courses 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 out 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.

⑦  
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, second-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 further reading about something with which they were already familiar was, in itself, perfectly sound and followed the concept of 'reading in depth'. What I failed to do, however, was to anticipate their vocabulary needs with the new material. In giving them a news magazine selection, I was thrusting them into a genre quite different from the one they had been accustomed to in a social science textbook.

⑧  
Remember the meaning/message distinction

Chall (1987) has noted the distinction for children reading in their first language between understanding the meaning and understanding the message. A youngster may know a word and use it in spoken language, yet have trouble reading it in print. The distinction, though not quite in the same way, occurs 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 meshing 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 exhilaration of English language teaching and learning.

As was the case with Neil Simon's pair (*The Odd Couple*, 1966), reading and vocabulary, the ELT 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, taking on something of each other's mannerisms. □

jobss  
non-central,  
unfamiliar  
wordy/phrases

enjoy old words,  
don't stress w/ facts

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help students guess; pilot first

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scholar  
+ building  
context

recognition  
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be there