A riveting good read!

Peter Viney shares his views and experiences of graded readers.

A confession: having spent my life teaching English, I was never very good at learning French. I was in the lower half of the class at age 14. Then a younger and more enlightened teacher issued us with a reader in French: a simplified Maigret story – the detective was popular on TV at the time. It was great. I could read it faster than my more competent classmates because I’m a good guesser, and I focused on the story … I did not stop to agonise over unfamiliar words, nor to note the mysteries of masculine and feminine with new items. We were told to read a chapter a night at home. In those far-off days, the comprehension questions next day were in English, and at last I could shine.

Years later, on an internal flight in Italy, I took the offered free paper and started perusing the football reports. ‘But you said you couldn’t speak Italian …’ said my Italian companion. I explained that if you’ve studied French and Latin, and know the words Beckham, Manchester United and Aston Villa, and guess from arbitro to arbitrator to referee, you can find out what you want to know. How did I guess that guardalinea meant linesman? Genius.

I’m not going to go into the virtues of extensive reading. Suffice it to say that it applies in every ELT situation, and every teacher should be enabling their students to access and benefit from readers.

Variety

In many situations, one reader will be issued to a class. Particularly in primary and secondary contexts, this enables teachers to monitor the students’ progress and also to explore reading techniques. I would always want to use a single reader in tandem with a library, where students have choice. Amongst graded readers, you can find original fiction written for EFL/ESL students, adaptations of both modern and classic fiction in English and a range of non-fiction titles, both general interest and specific interest. The sensible teacher will not opt to equip the library entirely from one graded reading series (though some publishers offer ‘library selections’ of a complete series at a discount). I would choose books from several different schemes. Here, the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF), an organisation dedicated to encouraging reading for pleasure amongst students of English, gives clear and helpful guidance. First, it provides a comparative chart of headword counts

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in different schemes (at www.rohwaring.org/erlscale/ERF_levels.htm) and, second, it runs the annual Language Learner Literature Awards (http://lerfoundation.org/wordpress/awards). If you only get the winners and finalists from the years 2004 to 2015, you will already have a good initial selection of books.

Remember that readers, especially fiction readers, do not go out of date. Those 2004 winners and finalists still work!

Student choice is important, too. You should have readers available at above and below the perceived class level. Some students may find it comforting to drop a level and have an easy read. Others may find that they can easily read up a level because they’re fascinated by volcanoes, or food, or boy bands or whatever. The interest they bring will help them cope with a ‘harder’ book. Student choice in level as well as subject matter helps deal with mixed abilities in a class.

Grading

Readers are graded by headword count (400 words, 750 words, 1,000 words, etc) and here the ERF Graded Reader Scale helps place different schemes in relation to each other. Most schemes are also structurally graded. Structural grading is important. In the broadest terms ‘Does it use past tense?’ ‘Does it use present perfect?’ ‘Does it use conditionals?’ ‘Does it use reported speech?’ are level markers.

Most schemes will also give a CEF (Common European Framework) level (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2), but frankly, I find these too broad to give more than a vague guide. Some schemes are ‘intuitively graded’. which means that in the view of the publisher a reader is ‘A1’ or ‘B2’.

You will find that Publisher A’s ‘1,000 headword level’ may be harder than Publisher B’s ‘1,000 headword level’. Structural grading is a major factor here, but so are the criteria for including additional words. Any reader needs story-specific words, in addition to its word count for the level. The major schemes are strict. They might allow (say) 20 extra words at level 1, 30 at levels 2 and 3, 40 at level 4, and so on.

Most schemes have increased the number of additional words in recent years. However, the important thing is that the students should read for pleasure and shouldn’t have to keep stopping at unfamiliar words. Forty extra words on 1,000 headwords is a good limit. I have seen readers which allow 200 extra words on 1,000, which to me is wildly excessive. It means that 20 percent of the words are outside the perceived level. That’s too much for rapid reading for pleasure.

In general, the international schemes from British and American publishers are stricter on additional words than readers from Continental European publishers. A German or Italian scheme can factor in the guessability (or common transfer into L1) of English words, and say ‘Well, no German speaker will have problems with these words’. This also means that the international schemes travel better than country-specific ones. An obvious factor is that speakers of Romance, Germanic and Scandinavian languages have a far better guess rate than speakers of unrelated languages. In East Asia or the Middle East, a European ‘750 headword’ reader will be harder for students than it would be in Europe or Latin America.

Good advice is to drop down a level.

You can use the ERF chart, and consider the CEF level. When setting up a library system, what many teachers do – once they’re familiar with the books – is to apply their own levels. In my school, we bought packs of coloured stickers and applied our own colour coding across different grading schemes: red was our level 1, yellow our level 2, and so on.

Word lists

One or two publishers helpfully list their wordlists for the levels and their structural grading at the back of the readers or in a teacher’s guide. Most don’t. I’m strongly in favour of giving access to the lists, but publishers are reluctant. I’ve been told that the carefully-researched and discussed lists might be borrowed by unscrupulous rival publishers. That’s true. Teachers have said, ‘It’s easy. Why don’t they just use frequency counts?’ But it’s not easy at all. The demands of graded readers are different. You need words like said, told, whispered, shouted, screamed as soon as the past tense is available. Words for dramatic events – gun, fire, sword, murder – might be more important than salt and pepper. Incidentally, research shows this is also true of newspaper language. We like to see words in neat sets: knife, fork, spoon. In graded readers, knife is easily the most useful, spoon next, and fork unlikely, though I once used it in a story which involved a garden fork. Words from defining vocabularies (lists of words used by lexicographers to write definitions) are important because readers have glossaries (see below) for the additional words. There’s no point in doubling up words with the same meaning, even if both are frequent. The graded reader author won’t need chair, seat and armchair at the lower levels. They won’t need fast, quickly and rapidly. So having made decisions, publishers are jealous of their lists.

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Having worked on three original schemes, each derived from earlier ones, I suspect there’s another reason. My 1980s 1,000-word list had cassette in it, but not computer. When I did the most recent list, I looked back at readers by several different authors. This was fascinating. My 1990s list had dog and cat in it. Several authors had used dog. However, cat had been used just once, and that was to define lion. So the new list retained dog but eliminated cat. If a particular reader needs cat in future, it can be an additional word. I believe publishers keep their lists secret because it allows them to update, and to tweak and improve the core lists. While this is a good thing, it may mean the 750-word list used to write a reader in 1990 (which is still available) might not be identical
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to the 750-word list used in 2015. To the student, this really won’t matter.

Glossaries
It is normal to gloss additional words or, in intuitively graded readers, ‘hard’ words. I prefer to gloss at the end of the story, as do most international publishers. Some country-specific and a few international publishers prefer to gloss on the page in a footnote. I really don’t like this because it breaks the reading flow, and also spoon-feeds the student by undermining their guessing ability. A rule in readers I wrote and edited was that new words should appear three times or more in a story, improving the student’s chance of guessing from context. Guessing from context is what we want them to do. I loathe glosses on the page even more when they have a translation. I also dislike translation at the back of the book, even in a country-specific reader. That undermines reference skills. Students benefit from monolingual dictionaries, and glossaries in graded readers should operate in the same way.

Exercises
As a series editor, I get comments from authors ranging from ‘Do they really, really need exercises?’ to ‘You know, exercises are in opposition to the process, I’d rather just have the story’ to a straight ‘I don’t do exercises. If you want them, you do them’. The Language Learner Literature Awards focus on the story or non-fiction text, and do not assess exercises or audio versions.

The trouble is, as any publisher will tell you, readers with exercises sell more copies. At one time, I favoured putting the exercises in the middle of a staple-bound book so that teachers could remove them. Then we tried the back of the book. Then we tried photocopiables, though as a parent and grandparent I hate seeing children’s work summed up in a pile of barely legible tattered old photocopies. Then we tried online. Now they’re at the back of the book again. With classic adaptations, which are longer, with more complex plots, we decided to have three sets of ‘The story so far …’ self-check exercise pages interspersed.

You will find that some readers, especially country-specific ones, have more exercises. Some are really ‘reading courses’ rather than extensive readers, in that they have a lot of exercises, put them after every chapter, and include pairwork and grammar activities. That’s not extensive reading. Reading is, after all, essentially a solitary activity. Readers should be a break from grammar work, too, working on deducing from context, guessing, reading for pleasure, building vocabulary. That is the reason for structural grading. We’re working from within known grammar. An exercise-heavy reader works in secondary systems in individual countries as a reading course supported by other graded readers. There are some fine readers from various European publishers which have too many exercises in my opinion … but you don’t have to do the exercises!

Audio
Some readers are bundled with CDRs. Others have readings which are free online. They are not essential. I would encourage the students to read the book first, then put it down and listen.

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Money
One of the reasons a whole class gets the same reader is that those in charge of the budget (school administrators or parents) understand one kid = one copy of the chosen book. There are alternatives. In a class of 30, you could buy six sets of five readers, so that the students can swap them around. Next year, term or month, buy different ones. Or persuade the school to set up a library, say budgeting one per student. I would obtain more than one copy of each book. It’s good if two people read the same book and can discuss it while it’s fresh in the mind.

Access is important, whether it be the ‘library trolley’ at intervals, or constant availability, but this does mean that you will have to budget for replacement copies. After several years of running a library scheme, I’d factor in at least a ten percent attrition rate for ‘I lost it! My dog ate it when it ate my homework / I left it on the bus / My dad saw it and said it was disgusting and threw it in the trash / I spilled my sticky soft drink on it / My baby brother threw up on it / Oh, Jane Smith left last week. She’s moved away.’

Some students may even love the stories so much they opt to keep them, overtly or clandestinely.

In the next issue of ETp, I will give advice to anyone thinking of adapting a classic work of fiction as a graded reader.