

Adapting Instructional Materials for L2 Learners

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One of the greatest challenges faced by teachers of young learners is how best to respond to the wide range of ability, maturity, ethnicity, language competence and individual needs existing in any typical class of children. The challenge has become even greater with the inclusion of children with disabilities and other special learning needs in ordinary classrooms. It is argued by some educators that to be truly effective, teaching must always accommodate educationally relevant differences among learners (Bender, 2002; Gregory & Chapman, 2002; O'Brien & Guiney, 2001). It is argued that when differentiation in approach occurs all children can make better progress in the curriculum.

According to the advocates for differentiated approach, meeting individual learning needs usually involves some degree of adjustment to curriculum content (for example, simplifying or reducing the number of new concepts to be covered, or breaking a topic into smaller steps), modification to the learning tasks and activities set for the children, adaptation of resource materials, and variation in the type of work to be produced (Deschenes, Ebeling & Sprague, 1999). In this brief paper it is impossible to cover all areas of potential modification, and it is my intention to explore just one — namely, the modification of instructional materials to make them more accessible to learners with a wide range of literacy skills.

Using simplified texts

A main barrier to learning for some children is the level of difficulty of the textbooks and other materials they are required to read. A strategy that teachers can use to help children read more confidently (including those learning to read in English as a second language) is to adjust downwards the readability level of the material they use for

practice purposes. By simplifying text in terms of vocabulary load and syntactical complexity, or by augmenting text with additional cues and supports, children are better able to develop fluency in reading (Conway, 1996). Studies have shown that fluency greatly facilitates reading comprehension by allowing readers to devote cognitive effort to higher-order processes of analysis and reflection, rather than to lower-order word recognition or decoding (Pikulski & Chard, 2005).

One obvious way that teachers can help L2 readers is to select published reading materials that are already graded in terms of language complexity. The books are written with the aim of introducing and repeating key words and language patterns at a controlled rate, so that learners establish automaticity in word recognition. By comparison, typical 'authentic' texts tend to present the novice reader with rather too many new challenges in every line, resulting in laborious word-by-word reading without meaning. Most graded reading series also provide opportunities for children to practise phonic decoding skills on a higher proportion of easily decodable words (Rubin, 2000). For L2 learners such material is particularly useful for independent reading as homework.

Although graded texts became unpopular in the 1980s and 1990s at the height of the 'whole language' movement, they have regained some respectability if used as just one component in a balanced reading program (Pressley, 1998). Those who object to their use fear that if children are given simplified material they may find it boring and will lose interest and motivation. However, an alternative school of thought has emerged supporting the use of simplified texts when first learning to read in English as a second language (e.g. Nation & Deweerdt, 2001). It is

believed that the careful control of vocabulary and sentence length in the early stages, together with deliberate repetition of words and phrases, can help L2 learners develop confidence as readers. At the same time, they are acquiring a basic sight vocabulary that will help them read other texts with a higher success rate.

Adapting print materials

A second approach is for teachers to adapt and modify existing print material, for example by re-writing it in an easier form, or by creating new supplementary materials at a simpler level around the same theme or topic. Naturally, this is a demanding and time-consuming process for a teacher, although it is frequently recommended as best practice in the professional literature on differentiation (e.g. James & Brown, 1998; Janney & Snell, 2004). If teachers do wish to produce differentiated material for their mixed-ability classes, some of the following principles could be applied for re-writing or augmenting text passages, worksheets, exercises, activity cards, or supplementary notes (Currie, 1990; Meese, 1992; Lovitt & Horton, 1994).

- ***Simplify vocabulary:*** Vocabulary is of course a major factor determining the readability level of any text. If readers instantly recognize and know the meaning of words they are encountering on the page, the whole interpretation process is quick and easy. Swift, fluent reading allows a reader to focus on meaning without having to spend time and effort in decoding and checking a word in a dictionary. Failure to understand several words in a paragraph very seriously reduces a reader's overall level of comprehension. When preparing simplified material for students, teachers should not use a difficult word when an easier word is available. Sometimes, however, it is essential to use a particular word in the text because it is an important element of what has to be learned in that lesson. For example, if the topic is about 'bacteria' there is no merit in trying to avoid the use

of that word. The word should be used, but the teacher should *pre-teach the meaning* and *the recognition* of the word before the student undertakes the reading. A disadvantage of simplifying vocabulary is that it may remove too much of the natural challenge that is required for children to develop independent word-attack skills.

- ***Shorten sentence length and/or change sentence structure:***

Factors of length and complexity influence how easily a sentence can be processed and understood. A single long sentence such as the following is more difficult to understand than the three shorter sentences below it.

- (a) Having already missed the bus (and then having to wait twenty minutes for a train) the two girls knew that they would arrive late at school that day.
- (b) The two girls missed the bus. They then had to wait twenty minutes for a train. They knew they would be late for school.

A long sentence makes greater processing demands on readers' attention and working memory; and grammatically complex sentences are particularly difficult for L2 children to read. The disadvantage of simplifying and shortening sentences is that it can result sometimes in fairly stilted language patterns. If the process is done badly, the passage can be more

difficult to read because the short and choppy sentences reduce the natural semantic and syntactic cues.

Sentence length is not the only factor that causes problems with readability. The order in which information is presented within the sentence can also be important. For example, it is considered that sentence (b) below is easier to process than sentence (a).

- (a) Using a radius of 8cm, construct a circle in the centre of your page.
- (b) In the middle of your page draw a circle with radius 8cm.

It is recognized that sentences in passive voice are potentially more difficult to process:

(a) The school camping activities were supervised by the parents. (passive voice)

(b) Parents supervised the camping activities. (active voice)

- **Provide clear illustrations or diagrams:** Whether the child is reading fiction or non-fiction material, illustrations can be very helpful in supporting the text. Such illustrations must relate directly and unambiguously to the information in the paragraph; they should not simply be cute cartoons or other embellishments.
- **Highlight important terms:** This form of cueing, with bold-type, colour or underline is helpful to all learners. A definition or explanation of the term can be provided in the margin.
- **Improve the layout and format of the sheet; try larger font size:** Often teachers tend to prepare sheets that are too densely packed with information. Instead, paragraphs should be brief and well spaced. Remove unnecessary detail. For beginning readers (or those with literacy difficulties) increasing the print size can

help by reducing the need for fine visual discrimination.

- **Use bullet points or lists when preparing worksheets or notes.** This is related to the point above regarding density of information on the page. Small chunks of information are easier to process.

Dissenting views

There are, of course, differences of opinion as to how far teachers should go in making the task of reading easier for L2 children. Some writers argue that at all times we should use only texts that represent authentic literature and 'real' language from a wide range of different genres, even though the vocabulary, style and language patterns may be quite challenging for second-language learners (Day & Bamford, 2002; Pang, Muaka, Bernhardt & Kamil, 2003). The suggestions above are provided, however, for those teachers who do see some merit in simplifying materials for the early stages of reading in a second language.

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