READING IMPROVLMENT FOR THE[1] PRE-ESP LEVEL

Fraida Dubin
American Language Institute
University of Southern
California

I. DEFINING THE SCOPE

What Is The Pre-ESP Level?

In designating a level I have called *pre*-ESP (English for special purposes), I am less concerned with proficiency than I am with need. The learners' need I will describe is that of reading improvement. The audience for *pre*-ESP takes in secondary school and college students, along with *adult* learners, many of whom have never become proficient readers in their first language, let alone English. Instead of presenting a case for the design of courses and materials for another special purpose, I want to point out how the reading skill is the pivotal component in most ESP programs. Course planners and materials writers often take it for granted that students at this level are mature readers when they enter such courses. But more frequently the reverse is the case.

The Prominence of ESP and Its Contribution to ESOL

The label ESP is a drawing card at conferences this year to be sure. In fact, I sometimes feel the language teaching profession holds certain similarities with the world of haute couture in which each new season brings out a new look in fashion. Actually, rather than holding out a new panacea or even a new method, English courses designed for special purposes look first at students' own objectives and purposes before making decisions about what to teach them. This attitude of focusing on the learner may not qualify as a method, but it has prevailed during this decade as a positive step towards professionalism. The concern with learners' needs has produced lively interest in a variety of specialized language courses: English for science and technology (EST), English for academic purposes (EAP), English for occupational purposes (EOP); I have even heard of one American university that boasts a program in English for engineers called Eng. eng.

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Along with the emphasis placed on learners' own objectives for learning English, scholars associated with the ESP thrust have begun to make provocative statements about the what-language-should-we-teach? question. The growing literature in the field has been primarily concerned with looking at the rhetorical and structural characteristics of textual matter associated with one style of writing -- that found in textbooks dealing with scientific subjects. (Lackstrom, 1977; Lackstrom, Selinker, Trimble, 1978). Although still tentative, these kinds of insights can be valuable for planning courses and writing materials.

In particular, attention to the rhetorical or textual discourse features of the material students must be able to read in English is, I believe, a real contribution of the ESP literature. In fact, concern with stylistic aspects of writing anticipates one of the vital skills of mature reading, the ability to switch one's mode based on the characteristics of the material being read. As Lackstrom (1977) points out: "The EST reader must share with the writer some knowledge . . . Where all language users must have a theory of speech acts, EST readers must know the rhetorical form of an EST argument." To advance the discussion: mature readers need to know the rhetorical form of a variety of writing styles in English.

Too often, courses designed for special purposes concentrate heavily on vocabulary and technical terminology while omitting explanations about the textual discourse features of the material being read. A frequent criticism of the various textbooks now on the market for EST and EOP is that they tend to be too simplistic in terms of learners' subject matter knowledge and too complex in terms of their English language competence. In such cases, it is probably well-developed reading skills which students lack as well. Pre-ESP instruction is significant because it gives explicit practice in reading a variety of stylistic types before learners concentrate on one area of special interest. If students entered ESP courses with pre-training in reading, they could then be free to concentrate on technical terminology in their field.

Reading In EFL: An Attainable Goal

For the learner who lives in a non-English speaking country, reading stands out as the skill which can be most easily performed. Even if a person cannot practice listening and speaking outside of the classroom, it is usually possible to practice reading in English at home. Just as to become a fluent speaker requres much practice, so does becoming a fluent reader require practice. So, for many learners the goal of fluency in reading is much more realistic than speaking. Becoming a fluent reader is an attainable goal, particularly in a program that gives instruction in all of the skills connected with the process of reading.

It is true that in most English language classrooms reading is a central activity. Students read bits of the new language, sometimes as model examples, other times as brief narratives or dialogues. They complete grammar exercises by reading sentences. They learn new vocabulary through reading the words in the textbook. But these typical classroom practices do not bridge the gap between reading the language textbook and reading natural examples from a variety of stylistic types -- fluent reading.

Even when students advance to so-called "readers" in English, they usually spend time on activities such as vocabulary practice, comprehension questions, structure practice, and possibly some discussion or writing activities as reinforcement of the thematic material in the reading passage. Nothing contained in this typical outline explicitly helps students with the skill of reading per se. Nothing helps them towards the goal of becoming mature readers. Yet the need for people to read competently, particularly for students in non-English speaking countries, is pressing.

Characteristics of Mature Readers

The field of reading is vast. It has been studied, tested, and quantified by specialists from a variety of disciplines concerned with human learning. From this array of research, I have found the work of two authors, Gibson and Levin (1975) valuable for setting out some of the characteristics of, or "active strategies" which mature readers use. These descriptions help to pin-point aspects of the skill of reading which language teaching specialists, in their concern with linguistic aspects, might overlook. 1) Mature readers possess flexibility of attentional strategies in reading different types of information. 2) Their strategies shift according to the characteristics of a text such as difficulty of concepts and style. 3) Mature readers vary their reading strategies as they gain knowledge of the material being read. That is, they slow down when the concepts are difficult, they skim when they know the content. 4) They shift their speed and attention according to their personal interests and objectives.

Other characteristics of mature readers which have been cited in the literature are these: 1) They know how to read at the right speed. The right speed is usually the fastest at which you can read and understand the material. 2) They continually compare the material with their own experience. 3) They question and evaluate as they read. 4) They look for the overall pattern or organization in the material they are reading. 5) They take in large chunks of written material at a time; their eyes can pick up key words and phrases in paragraphs, often getting the meaning of a span of material without reading every sentence. They literally "lift meaning off of the page."

These insights into the reading process can guide us to design programs that will help learners of English become better readers. At the same time, they offer important clues for writing materials and classroom exercises. We are familiar with the term, the craft of writing. We should also be concerned with the craft of reading, or the know-how involved in reading well.

Mature Vs. Limited Readers

There are some important reasons, I believe, for advocating attention to general reading skills before tracking people into courses that concentrate on one subject area and, consequently, one stylistic type of reading material. For coping with the modern world of ideas, students in ESOL classes need to be able to manage a variety of written styles. They need to have a repertoire of reading modes. Concentration on one field usually implies reading practice in a limited range -- textbook material.

Younger learners, those in secondary schools, have probably not decided as yet on future careers. They are most certainly at the pre-ESP level. This is not to say that their own interests should not be taken into account in designing a reading program. But at the same time, they should be exposed to a variety of types of writing. Even adults, despite the pragmatic attraction of concentrating on selections from one field, often voice an interest in being able to read more widely. The professional person who wants to read in English needs to be able to move from journals to professional papers and even to weekly newsmagazines.

There seems to be a covert, anti-humanistic slant in pursuing ESP at all costs. Pigeon-holing people into one field or another without allowing them an opportunity to taste of a variety is contrary to most prevailing philosophies of education. At its extreme, proliferation of the ESP idea in English language instruction without attention to general reading skills could produce highly limited readers. For example, only being able to read a technical manual in English would qualify more as deciphering than as reading in the mature sense.

If this were an ideal world, I would want to see the reading improvement component included in all English language programs before students entered ESP courses where they then would receive further preparation in reading materials in their own field of interest. For many adults, however, this plan is not practical. Reading improvement activities, however, can just as well be incorporated into courses that concentrate on one subject area. In these cases, the focus on an area of interest can be maintained while still offering practice materials for reading different types of writing styles.

II. CREATING READING PRACTICE FOR WRITING STYLES

This section presents an outline of some important writing styles in English. Under each, suggested practice types which would follow a reading selection are indicated. Of course, a specific selection would always need to be studied closely in order to select appropriate types. The practices are designed to guide students into adjusting their reading modes to the particular stylistic characteristics of the material. The aim is to give learners strategies which they can subsequently use in reading on their own. These stylistic categories and the examples of practice types are taken from READING BY ALL MEANS (Dubin, Olshtain).

Narrative Style

The narrative form is not unique to fiction. Non-fiction frequently incorporates narrative in prose passages. Because it is found universally, it is more familiar to people who read in their first language. This makes narrative style a good place to begin a reading improvement program:

1) Find the writer's voice. Is the story or narrative passage told by the writer using first person, is it told by someone else using third person, or is it reported by the writer?

2) Sequence the events. In what order did events take place?

3) Plot the episodes. What happened in the separate episodes?

4) Isolate key words for: a) time signals b) description c) character d) mood e) emotion.

5) Predict what comes next. Stop the action. . . Then what happened?

Expository Style

This category incorporates a wide variety of sub-types, including Newspaper Style. Selections should reflect, as much as possible, concerns and interests of the students.

1) Read separately for: a) overall theme. Can you see the forest for the leaves? b) main sections or headings c) supporting ideas and extended details.

2) Find linking words. What words connect the main ideas of the separate paragraphs?

3) Understand words by context clues. What words in the sentence or paragraph are close to the meaning of unknown words?

4) Trace rhetorical devices. How has the writer used mechanisms such as 'the straw horse,' cause and effect, comparison, contrast, illustration and exemplification?

5) Draw conclusions. From reading the article, what can we say about the author's point of view?

6) Uncovering implications. What didn't the writer tell us?

7) Identifying the audience. What audience did the writer intend this for?

Newspaper Style

1) Find the answers to wh- questions in the first paragraph. What information does the lead contain?

2) Find the source of the article. What does the date-line tell us? What does the by-line tell us?

Procedural Style

Everything from cook books to technical manuals are written in procedural style. As Bruner (1967) points out: "There is, on the face of it, a sharp distinction between the descriptive language of recipes and the descriptive language of things."

1) Find the steps. What are the separate steps to be followed?

2) Sequence the steps. In what order are the steps stated? Can any steps be completed in an order different from the one given?

3) Arrange key words into categories. What words are repeated frequently? Where do they usually occur? At the beginning of the sentence? In the middle, at the end?

4) Perform tasks related to the material. Can we make a model or a diagram to illustrate the procedure?

Textbook Style

Lackstrom (1977) points out that "one finds advanced technical reports specifying rhetorical form with section headings and presupposing a good deal of content, while introductory texts leave inexplicit the rhetorical form specifying to a great extent informational content. What is striking is that the real burden of comprehension is borne by the

introductory student, who must not only get the possibly unfamiliar facts and concepts out of his reading, but must also intuit the direction the author is taking in the discourse." This statement at least gives us some clues about what to look for in textbook style that separates it from others.

1) Survey the parts of the book. a) the table of contents b) the parts c) the chapters d) the sections e) the section headings.

2) Find definitions in the context. How has the writer used the word in sentences with IS, ARE?

3) Find words that signal. a) listing b) classifying c) contrast d) cause and effect.

4) Trace main ideas and supporting evidence. What material does the author provide to illustrate and exemplify the main ideas?

5) Interpret data. What are the implications of the findings the author presents? Can we relate them to our own lives and times?

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