

## BOOKS AS INPUT FOR INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES

**Susan Parks**

Can you remember the first time you read a whole book in French? I can. It was Albert Camus' *L'Etranger*, one of three books assigned in an Introductory French literature course I was taking in my first year at university. The professor's assignment was straightforward: Read the book and come to class prepared to discuss it. And so we set out, dictionary in hand — a solitary ordeal which pitted endurance against pride, integrity against the ever present temptation to track down a more palatable translation in the university library.

Since that time our understanding of how to integrate reading into the second language classroom has evolved considerably (Heatherington 1985). Furthermore, the recent introduction by publishers of high interest, low vocabulary books has made reading in English an exciting reality for even elementary and low intermediate students. One series which I have found particularly suitable in this regard is *Longman's Structural Readers*, which, despite the word "structural", is written in a natural style. Both fiction and non-fiction books are available in this series and are graded into six levels of difficulty.

The reading activity which I shall describe here was designed for elementary /low intermediate students enrolled in an intensive English for Academic Purposes program where students are in class five days a week. For this activity I used Longman's non-fiction series (levels 2-6) which includes such titles as *The World Under the Sea*, *The Energy Crisis*, *Man and Science*, *Man Against Space*. The objective of the activity was to use reading as a source of input to foster interaction through a variety of communicative tasks. The activity is structured so that each student ends up with a partner who has the same book. The steps involved in setting up and carrying out the activity are described below.

### **Selecting a Book**

Bring in the Longman's books and display them on a table. Explain to the students that they should select a book according to their interests and the level of difficulty of the book. Tell them the books are graded by level and range from Level 2 to Level 6. Allowing students to select their own book also provides for differences in learning style. Those students who enjoy a challenge pick the more demanding books; those whose frustration level is lower choose the easier ones. To ensure further, however, that students end up with books with which they feel comfortable, suggest that they open their books and read the first page. Using this simple guideline,

I have found students do a remarkable job of sorting themselves out. When setting up this activity, be sure to choose a variety of titles, keeping in mind the students' interests. However, care must also be taken to bring in only enough books for the number of students in the class and to ensure that for every book there are at least two copies so that each student ends up with a partner who has the same book. When the students have finished selecting their books, have them get with a person who has the same book as they do. Partners will work together for the duration of the activity.

### **Previewing a Book**

In pairs have students fill out the "Previewing a Book" form (Appendix A). Encourage students to discuss their answers before writing them down.

### **Predicting: Using Pictures and Illustrations**

Give students five minutes or so to flip through their books to look at pictures and read captions. When the time is up, have them tell each other what they think the book will be about. If they want, they can show each other specific pictures and talk about them. In addition to helping create expectations about the content, this activity serves as yet another opportunity to foster real communication.

### **Setting Objectives**

Give each student five paper clips. Tell the students they have one week to finish the book and have them decide in their pairs how many pages they will read each night. Tell them they may want to allocate extra pages for the weekend. When they have decided how they will divide up the book, have them mark off the pages with the paper clips. Having students set clear objectives and divide up material into manageable chunks helps ensure success.

### **Surveying**

Tell students to take the first section of their book and survey it using the following procedure:

1. Read all of the first two paragraphs.
2. Read the first sentence or two of each of the other paragraphs.
3. Read all of the last two paragraphs.

In pairs have the students predict what the section is about.

## **Tellback**

Have the students return to the beginning of the section and do a tellback (Vogel, Brassard, Parks, Thibeaudeau & White 1983). Ask students to begin to read and after two minutes or so, have them stop, turn over their books and tell each other everything they can remember. Continue in this way until students have finished or almost finished the section. During a tellback students do not use dictionaries; they read for the gist and try to make as much sense of the text as they can. Interaction with a partner enables students to share information and help each other extract meaning. If during their discussions students disagree on the meaning of the text, this lack of consensus may serve to alert them to a comprehension problem which may necessitate rereading.

## **Homework**

Students reread or complete the section they have marked off and then write out six questions on a piece of paper. Tell the students not to write out the answers to their questions. The questions should span the entire section and not be taken solely from the first page or two.

## **Follow-up Activity**

A 30-minute follow-up activity is scheduled for each of the remaining days the students are reading their books:

15 minutes: Have students get with their partners, exchange the questions they prepared at home, then skim to answer them. Set a time limit and encourage students to find the answers as quickly as possible. Allow time for pairs to check their answers with each other. If they disagree, encourage them to refer to their books to show each other where they found their answers.

5 minutes: Have students survey the next section.

10 minutes: Have students do tellbacks. (Students read as much as they can in the time allotted).

When the students have finished the tellback, have them reread the section as homework and make up a new set of questions.

## **Variations**

Variations on this core activity serve to create further opportunities for interaction and recycling of information:

Have students ask each other their questions and answer orally instead of skimming for the answers.

Have students get in pairs with other students who have not read the same book and have them tell each other what their book is about.

Encourage them to ask each other questions to get more information. Students also use the pictures in their books as a stimulus for explaining the information.

Have students make a list of the five most interesting facts they learned from their book. Have them discuss their list with one or two other students. What are the facts? Why do they find them interesting? Do the others agree? Comments?

Have students write up a summary for a section or the whole book.

Have students prepare a section of their book as a retell (Vogel et al. 1983; Sklar & Ullmann 1983).

Use the students' questions to review question-making in the context of their own work. Write some of their questions on the board or type them up on stencils to focus on problems and elicit correct forms. Encourage students to help each other correct their questions.

Reading a book in English provides the ESL student with a true sense of accomplishment. In this article I have suggested ways in which books can be used as the starting point for a variety of tasks which maximize interaction and recycling of information. Before trying the book activity, however, students should have practice with shorter reading materials doing tellbacks, predicting, using pictures and diagrams, and making up their own questions. Using the book activity described above as a model, similar activities for pairs or small groups can be set up for higher levels by selecting more challenging reading materials, either fiction or non-fiction, with regard for the interests of the students. At intermediate levels, for example, students can select articles from Scholastic's *Science World* or *Reader's Digest*. As pairs or groups of students can be working on different reading materials, the activity is excellent for classes of mixed language proficiency.

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## REFERENCES

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**APPENDIX A**  
**TASK: PREVIEWING A BOOK**

With your partner answer the following questions about your book.

1. What is the title of your book?
2. Who is the author?
3. Who is the publisher?  
In what year was the book published?
4. Does your book have a Table of Contents?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, what kind of information can you find there?
5. Is anything written on the back cover?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, what kind of information can you find there?

**6. ORGANIZATION**

Flip through your book.

How many pages does it have?

How is it organized? Choose (a), (b), (c) or (d).

**(a) Chapters**

How many?

What is the title of Chapter I?

What is the title of Chapter IV?

What is the title of the last chapter?

**(b) Section headings**

Give the name of the first three and the last one.

**(c) Short stories**

How many?

Give the name of:

— the first one

— the second one

— the third one

With your partner decide on the three you like best and in what order you're going to read them.

**(d) Just text; no divisions.**