

OUTTAKES FROM *READER'S CHOICE*: ISSUES IN MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT¹

Sandra Silberstein

Most ESL professionals are materials developers; ESL instructors, in particular, produce countless exercises and exams. Though we assure students that "the process is more important than the product," even veteran teachers find this advice difficult to heed. While we encourage language learners to share their unsuccessful attempts with their peers, TESL colleagues rarely share their preliminary attempts: exercises which document the materials development process. This absence of dialogue denies teachers and authors important sources of insight into a central activity of our profession. As antidote to this situation, the following discussion is presented.

For a number of years in the mid-1970's, I worked intensively on a materials development project that resulted in the textbook *Readers' Choice* — a reading skills² text for students of English as a second language.

In retrospect, early stages of this project illustrate the development of a theoretical perspective as well as the often vexing, sometimes amusing issues of judgment faced by the ESL materials developer. The following discussion outlines the evolution of a theoretical approach using outtakes³ to illustrate the important decisions with which we were faced. The discussion is not intended as a defense of a particular set of decisions. Rather, it is offered as a case study illustrating the types of issues confronting classroom teachers who seek to integrate theory and classroom practice.

The book was to reflect a consistent psycholinguistic approach to reading. We worked within a framework of theoretical and pedagogical guidelines in order to assure consistency in critiquing our work. The intent was to respond to the familiar dilemma more recently expressed by Karl Krahnke in the *TESOL Newsletter*: How do we know when a classroom activity works? Is it enough to say "it works" if students and teachers have enjoyed themselves and an activity has filled the hour with purposeful activity? For us, this criterion was necessary but not sufficient to demonstrate success. We judged an exercise to have worked if, in addition to providing classroom pleasure, it conformed to our guidelines for pedagogically sound reading materials. The guidelines grew out of our exploration of contemporary reading theory.

We began by adopting the theoretical position advanced by Kenneth Goodman, Frank Smith and others that reading is a "psycholinguistic

guessing game.” Although many readers will be familiar with this approach, I provide a brief review.⁴

According to the Goodman/Smith model, efficient readers develop presuppositions about the content of a passage. That is, their knowledge of the world and, for example, the title of an article help them to develop expectations about what they will read. The efficient reader then scans along the lines of print and down the page to confirm or refute those presuppositions. If they are confirmed, the reader continues with an increasing store of information on the topic. If the presuppositions are not confirmed, the reader returns and rereads more carefully.

The proficient reader is an active, information-processing individual. As reading is quite rapid, the efficient reader must use a minimum number of clues to extract the author’s message from the page. Furthermore, the efficient reader does not read everything in the same way. Most people would not read the weekend entertainment guide as thoroughly as a textbook before an exam unless they were expecting the arrival of a difficult houseguest. Similarly, it is not possible to skim quickly a history text and expect to pass an exam on it.

It becomes the responsibility of the teacher to train students to determine their own goals and strategies for a particular reading, to give students practice and encouragement in using a minimum number of syntactic and semantic clues to obtain the maximum amount of information, and to encourage students to take risks, to guess, to ignore their impulses to be always correct. Our goal was to develop a range of materials that gave students practice in a range of reading activities.

Subsequent reading theory and research has continued to elaborate the important and active relation of reader to text. Contemporary “interactive models” of reading, including schema theory, build on the notion that reading involves complex cognitive processes through which readers interact with and create meaning from texts. (See, for example, Alderson and Urquhart 1984; Carrell, Devine and Eskey in press; Carrell and Eisterhold 1983, Silberstein 1987, Smith 1983, and Widdowson 1984.) It is not within the purview of this discussion, however, to elaborate fully a single approach to reading. Rather, the intent is to demonstrate the complex interactions inherent in attempts to integrate theory and practice.

With an eye toward pedagogy, we articulated the following guidelines for developing reading tasks.

1. *Reading tasks must be realistic in terms of both the real world and students’ abilities.* Returning to our example above, one would not ask students to read with great care where one would not do so in real life. We tried to place our readings in a realistic context and to have our students tackle reading tasks they might actually encounter. Similarly, exercises

should be realistic with respect to students' abilities. While we preferred to use unedited, "real" language, we occasionally found it necessary to edit passages in order to make them accessible to our students.

2. *The reading passage determines appropriate reading tasks.* If students are to be encouraged to choose different reading strategies for different kinds of passages, one must not write the same kind of exercise for each reading. Individual texts will suggest particular teaching activities. A passage written largely in the passive voice, for example, "cries out" for work on the passive, *but* only when such activities are justified by other criteria. One would not want students to undertake a careful syntactic analysis of a passage that merited only rapid scanning for a single piece of information.

3. Finally, we believed that textbooks and teachers should *teach before they test*. We encouraged students to focus more on the process than the product of reading comprehension, hoping that our efforts to avoid premature testing would lead to ample, nonjudgmental classroom practice. In addition, adherence to the maxim of teaching before testing, built in a bias against creating tasks which were unrealistic with respect to our students' language abilities.

The following outtakes from *Reader's Choice* illustrate these principles at work. At the risk of suggesting premature self-testing, readers may enjoy considering each exercise a moment before reading the critiques which follow. Often these exercises conformed to the criterion of classroom pleasure, but they violated our guidelines in some important way(s).

1. The first exercise was designed to give students practice in using the minimum number of syntactic clues to obtain the maximum amount of information; it was designed to make students careful readers. It began with these instructions and examples:

Often misreading a single phrase can lead to misunderstanding an entire passage. This exercise is designed to test your speed and comprehension in reading short phrases. If the two expressions on a line mean *approximately* the same thing ... put an *S* (same) between them. If they do *not* mean the same thing, put a *D* (different).

Examples:

He is not unlike his brother. *S* He's like his brother.

If I were rich. *S* I am rich.

The exercise contained forty sets of phrases.

What's Wrong: This exercise completely violated the spirit of a psycholinguistic approach to reading. While it is the case that affixes and "structure vocabulary" can cause problems for some readers, the kind of word-by-word reading demanded by this exercise was precisely what we had hoped

to discourage. Rather, we wanted students to learn to read quickly in order to confirm hypotheses, and to use context to help disambiguate sentences. The exercise is completely decontextualized.

2. In another exercise our goal was to provide practice in reading unabridged realia. A schedule of trains running between Chicago and Toronto was followed by a set of true/false questions such as these:

True or False:

_____ It is twenty miles from Flint to Lapeer.

_____ The Blue Water #365 leaves Battle Creek at 9:35

What's Wrong: This exercise violated our commitment to realism. One enters a train station with a set of open-ended questions: How long is the trip from one location to another? When does the train leave? Rarely does one enter with a set of true/false questions in mind.

3. The rationale for the next exercise was stated in the directions. The intent was to provide students practice recognizing the logical structure of written English arguments.

This exercise is designed to make you aware of the relationships among ideas in short paragraphs. You are to read the paragraphs and find the word or words which do not belong. Such words will be of the following types:

- a. illogical connectors
- b. irrelevant facts
- c. redundant information
- d. nonsensical information

Example:

The thieves are stealing fruit, not cows, but the crime is just as serious as the cattle rustling of the old West. Midway through this season's harvest, more than \$1 million worth of apples have been stolen from fruit farmers. Although rewards have been offered and new laws proposed, fruit farmers, *who also raise chickens*, feel that they have little chance of stopping the thefts.

What's Wrong: This exercise is a tribute to how clever we had become as materials developers, often at the expense of our students. There is nothing in psycholinguistic theory that suggests that efficient reading requires the ability to edit someone else's work. Yet this is precisely what we were asking of our students. While we claimed we were teaching students merely to *recognize* the relations among ideas in short passages, we were asking them to do much more. In fact, we were requiring them to learn a cumbersome typology of errors — errors they would not normally find in the texts they read. Insofar as one wishes to develop students' editing skills, such work is better placed within the context of *writing*

instruction. The task proved unrealistic as a reading activity because it required careful reading inappropriate to the *Time Magazine* articles we had altered to create the exercise.

To be sure, ours was not an argument against integrated curricula. The success of coordinated reading and writing instruction has been obvious. Our argument was simply that one should not confuse reading skills practice with exercises in editing.

4. Below are the instructions for another activity:

This exercise is designed to give you experience with several types of ambiguities. Write two different meanings for each sentence below.

Example:

You must speak Arabic.

It is necessary that you speak Arabic.

I conclude that you speak Arabic.

What's Wrong: Again, this is a writing exercise. Students can work long and hard on this task without having spent very much time reading. Furthermore, the task is, for the most part, unrealistic. It is difficult to imagine a circumstance in which the reader would need to *produce* several readings for a single sentence; normally, one will *recognize* the intended meaning from the redundancies of natural language and from context.

5. The directions accompanying a scanning task provide our next example. Remember, by *skimming* we mean reading to get a general or overall sense of a passage; *scanning* requires reading quickly for a single piece of information.

This exercise is designed to give you practice in deciding where to look for information. Below are questions you might ask if you were looking for information in a poetry anthology. Read each question carefully and decide where you would look for the answer. Put the appropriate letter in the blank provided.

- a. Table of Contents
- b. Text
- c. Author Index
- d. Index of First Lines

A list of questions followed such as "Where would you find a listing of the pages where information about Robert Frost can be found?" Upon completing this introductory exercise, students scanned sections of indices and text for the answers to specific questions.

What's Wrong: This is a splendid example of testing before teaching. Students had not been introduced to these elements of a poetry text before they were asked to make decisions about them. Moreover no example is

provided. Note also that this exercise is preparatory to the actual scanning task. Students could spend a good deal of time preparing for an exercise, the purpose of which is to demonstrate how quickly one can scan.

6. Finally, after reading a newspaper article entitled, "April Weather in Ann Arbor," students were asked to fill in numerical tables painstakingly designed to summarize all the data in the passage. See the Table.

Table from "April Weather in Ann Arbor"

April Averages (Temperature)		April Records (Temperature)	
Daytime High	Nighttime Low	High	Low

March	April	Monthly High	Daily High
Temperature		Snow	
	48.2°		

# of Heating Days		Rain	
		6.57 in. 1961	

What's Wrong: We had created a task which was unrealistic both in terms of students' abilities and their needs in the real world. We expected students to complete, in a matter of moments, a task we had needed weeks to design. Moreover, one would not ordinarily read such an article in the detail demanded by our exercises. In effect, we had not allowed the article to determine what we would do with it. We had forgotten that an article on April in Ann Arbor is worth no more than five or ten minutes, and then only if it is March and one is in Ann Arbor.

Although they are appealing for their conceptual economy, these guidelines and the critiques based on them convey a suspicious aura of completeness and authority. Any experienced classroom teacher will wonder at the suggestion of a uni-directional influence of theory on practice. Must not theory accomodate the life of the classroom? For example, at some

point many teachers will create "unrealistic" true/false questions because of pedagogical considerations such as ease of scoring, or the need to train foreign students in the true/false test format. One wonders if we really began with the well-developed schema outlined above apparently devoid of classroom input.

The problem with the description thus far is that in large measure it presents only a product, thereby obscuring the messy aspects of process. In fact, the guidelines emerged from our struggle to unify theory and practice.

A Few Words on Process

We had first to discover the necessity of applying our experience as educators. Initially, our commitment to a psycholinguistic approach had grown from a concern that ignorance can masquerade as instinct and experience. Knowledge of current research on the reading process, then, would help us evaluate our instincts within a consistent conceptual framework. Gradually we began to suspect that pedagogical constraints would force us to amend psycholinguistic theory as we understood it.

The discussion which follows is not intended as a defence of a particular set of decisions. Rather, it is an example of the types of decisions confronting classroom teachers who seek to integrate theory and classroom practice. In this instance, the dilemma was created by the fact that there is no "psycholinguistic method" for teaching reading; the value of psycholinguistics lies in its provision of insight into the reading process. As we understood it, the "psycholinguistic guessing game" as a model of rapid, efficient, "realistic" reading, suggested the use of only full passages in the reading classroom. This precluded paragraph - and the sentence-level work, as well as vocabulary skill-building. But the psycholinguistic model had been developed for native speakers. Recall that, according to this perspective, the proficient reader selects the minimum number of clues needed to extract the author's message from the page. While native speakers might be expected to recognize those language clues which would prove most fruitful, our experience in the ESL classroom suggested that nonnative speakers needed practice in recognizing language clues at all levels. We revised the Goodman/Smith model to acknowledge the fact that we were not teaching reading alone. Sometimes we were teaching English. We redefined *realism* to accommodate the fact that nonnative speaker comprehension really can turn on vocabulary and syntax. Thus we sometimes focused on vocabulary and syntax attack strategies that students could use when text comprehension failed. We did not abandon realism as a criterion; we maintained our major focus on reading full texts. But we did allow vocabulary and syntax-level exercises into the class-

room. We had determined that pedagogical imperatives modify theory.

These particular pragmatic decisions do not constitute revealed wisdom. Some future psycholinguistic orthodoxy may embrace this particular incorporation of vocabulary and sentence-level work into nonnative reading instruction. Or we may develop alternative responses. The essential point is that a willingness to accommodate theory to the life of the classroom must inform any serious attempt to synthesize pedagogical and theoretical insights. Moreover, progress is made only through a tolerance for false starts; promising ideas are perfected in the classroom. As an illustration, the guidelines described earlier developed over time, evolving in large measure as a result of classroom teaching and critiquing our first unit.

One unit was based on a reading selection called, "Earthquake" which we had found in *Aramco World Magazine*. In retrospect, almost everything about this reading passage and its exercises was problematic. The reader will have no trouble recognizing the major problem with this unit after examining several of the questions that accompanied the reading.

The first thing students would have seen, even before the passage itself, was a Vocabulary from Context exercise. In this activity, students were given several sentences using the same word in order to guess its meaning. The first sentence always came directly from the reading passage. Here are a few examples:

For *massive*: "In four awful minutes on Saturday August 31, a *massive* earthquake literally wiped Kakhk off the map."

For *devastate*: "The earthquake *devastated* fourteen villages."

For *demolish*: "The earthquake *demolished* sixteen villages and left 100,000 people homeless."

In a scanning exercise, students then had to scan the first section of the article for such macabre facts as "How many bodies were recovered?" and "How many villages were destroyed?"

For months we found it unremarkable to write dispassionate exercises about a major Middle East tragedy. In fact, I was pleased that we had found an article that dealt with a part of the world familiar to so many of our students. It took us some time to note that reading about tragedies close to home does not make one feel more secure in a language learning environment. A major element of the process of materials development for reading classes, then, involves the choice of reading passages. Not only must they accommodate the interests and abilities of students, but also students' sensibilities as people and citizens of the world. Of course on some level we had always known this; ironically, conscientious attention to the details of the materials development process had obscured larger

issues about which we cared a good deal.

The "Earthquake" unit did not prove salvagable. But our unsuccessful efforts to rehabilitate it helped us appreciate the necessity of discarding unsatisfactory attempts. Once we accepted the notion that exercises and units could be entirely rejected, the remainder of the "Earthquake" unit could be critiqued with the zealously that led eventually to the guidelines presented above.

Remember that the unit began with a vocabulary exercise followed by scanning questions, such as the following: "What were the townspeople proud of?" "How many bodies were recovered?" "What happened at 2:17 p.m.?" "How many villages were destroyed?" Aside from their macabre quality, the scanning questions posed another problem. In critiquing the activity, we came to appreciate that the standard of realism would have to be applied more generally than we had understood. We learned to apply the standard not only to the selection of readings, but also to the construction of exercises. Realistically, readers do not often scan for specific pieces of information before they know that the information is available in the passage. First one skims, then one scans. Thus, we had our first guideline: *Exercises must be realistic in terms of how one reads in the real world.*

Following the reading and comprehension questions, we inserted enormously cumbersome exercises which required students to diagram sentences and outline paragraphs. Had these been necessary to the comprehension of the passage, we would have placed them before the comprehension questions. These activities did not aid comprehension, but we had wanted to incorporate these elements of language study. In effect, we were asking students to outline single paragraphs in a magazine article they might have read in a dentist's office. Students would not need to outline a passage they had understood without difficulty, and would consider "light" (though unpleasant) reading. We had violated what became our second guideline: *The reading passage determines appropriate reading tasks.*

We would rely on these guidelines throughout the rest of the materials development process. While they proved invaluable, the benefit of working within a theoretical framework is still only part of the story. In the end, the process documented here demonstrates the complex and contradictory nature of the work we do. One must aim for realism, for example, while accommodating pedagogical necessity. Our attempts to resolve this apparent contradiction do not necessarily represent permanent solutions. Guidelines alone cannot serve the needs of ESL professionals. We are reminded that language teachers are faced with difficult decisions and subtle judgments at every moment. Their judgments, informed by theory, will be based on knowledge of the life of the classroom and their students.

While the absence of unqualified solutions may seem initially daunting, the process of questioning and discovery, the challenge of accommodating theory and practice, can prove the uniquely satisfying hallmark of our profession.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Reader's Choice: A Reading Skills Text for Students of English as a Second Language*. Margaret Baudoin, Ellen S. Bober, Mark A. Clarke, Barbara K. Dobson and Sandra Silberstein. University of Michigan Press, 1977.

Many of the ideas in this paper were refined during the three-year development of *Reader's Choice*. I am indebted to my co-authors, Margaret Baudoin Metzinger, Ellen S. Bober, Mark A. Clarke and Barbara K. Dobson for many hours of valuable shop talk. Thanks also to friends and colleagues for comments on an earlier draft of this paper: Douglas N. Brown, Mark A. Clarke, Anne Gere, William Harshbarger, Diane Larsen-Freeman, Joan Morley, James Nattinger, Tom Ressler, Charles Schuster, Susan Starbuck, and James Tollefson.

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2. In the context of the current literature, the term *skills* can be confusing. In this discussion, *skills* denotes those strategies by which a reader interprets and creates meaning from a text. Reading skills comprise the techniques by which a reader develops and achieves reading goals. These might include the decision and ability to skim or scan. Similarly, vocabulary attack strategies such as guessing from context would be considered reading skills. This usage contrasts with *skills* as a set of abilities other than, perhaps preceding reading, such as knowledge of phonics or the alphabet.
3. In film *outtakes* are those shots which do not make their way into the final product. In this paper, outtakes refer to those exercises, and versions thereof, which are ultimately rejected by the materials developer.
4. Elaborations of this perspective can be found in Goodman (1970, 1973) and Smith (1973). A more detailed discussion of the implications of this work for curriculum planning may be found in Clarke and Silberstein (1977).

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THE AUTHOR

Sandra Silberstein is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Washington. She is co-author of *Reader's Choice* and has published numerous articles on ESL theory and practice, and narrative theory. She has served as a reading consultant to CDELT (a joint Egyptian/British Council/Fullbright Commission curriculum development project) in Egypt. Currently she is at work on the book *Techniques in Reading*.

ERRATUM:

In Vol. 4 (1), the reference list for 2 In the Classroom articles by Sue Ling was inadvertently abbreviated. The full reference list for the two articles follows. Our sincerest apologies for any inconvenience this error caused.

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