

# ESL READING: MORE ON TEXT COMPREHENSIBILITY<sup>1</sup>

Heather Lotherington-Woloszyn

## CRITIQUE OF HETHERINGTON

Anne Hetherington's article "Assessing the suitability of reading materials for ESL students" (1985, *TESL Canada Journal*, 3(1), 37-52), is informative and practical, providing a much-needed focus on the ESL learner as a crucial participant in the reading process who cannot be ignored in the assessment of text comprehensibility. Hetherington stresses the importance of the ESL learner's background knowledge, cultural awareness, interests, and purposes for reading as factors to consider together with the content and language of the text in making judgments about the "difficulty" of a text. She outlines the shortcomings of relying on frequency lists to determine vocabulary difficulty, and of using syntactic complexity formulae — which can yield conflicting results — to assess sentence difficulty. She offers, in concluding, a set of useful guidelines to help ESL teachers choose and produce appropriate reading materials for their learners.

The article exposes the elusive nature of text complexity. However, Hetherington makes some comments on:

- 1) how educational publishers simplify texts for ESL learners,
  - 2) where the "difficulty" lies in ESL reading comprehension, and
  - 3) how teachers can simplify texts for ESL learners,
- which invite further discussion.

### How do educational publishers simplify language for ESL learners?

Hetherington asserts that text difficulty has traditionally been assessed in terms of the linguistic characteristics of a text. While publishers do indeed consider the linguistic features of a text in assessing text difficulty, the criteria they use in developing graded or simplified materials are both more extensive, and less uniform than Hetherington suggests.

Hetherington assumes that texts for ESL learners are simplified according to the criteria and methods used in simplifying texts for L1 learners (such as basal readers and special education materials). This is not true. Despite the fact that materials produced for L1 audiences may be promoted as being appropriate for ESL learners, most ESL reading materials are designed specifically for ESL readers, using guiding criteria which take into account the text, the ESL learner and the educational market conditions (Lotherington-Woloszyn 1986).

Hetherington implies that readability formulae are used extensively in the production of readers for ESL learners. In a survey of British publishers of simplified reading materials for ESL learners<sup>2</sup>, conducted in the U.K., Lotherington (1983) found no evidence of readability formulae being used as production guides for ESL simplified readers. In a more extensive survey of Canadian, British, and American publishers of simplified reading materials destined for Canadian learners, Lotherington-Woloszyn (1986) found readability formulae to account for 12.76% of the reference sources publishers consult in choosing simplification criteria. However, as actual simplification guidelines, readability formulae constituted only .4% of the criteria used. Furthermore, readability was mentioned only 1.08% of the time when publishers were asked to state the 5 most important criteria guiding the simplification and grading of ESL reading materials. A total of 53 variables were found to be considered by educational publishers in the assessment of language difficulty.

It can, therefore, be concluded that readability formulae are not extensively used in the production of simplified materials for ESL learners. This finding does not, of course, apply to materials produced for L1 readers, but used with ESL learners.

### **Where does the “difficulty” lie in ESL reading comprehension?**

Hetherington states “most teachers and students would agree that vocabulary is a major, if not *the* major factor affecting (ESL text) difficulty” (p. 38). Although this statement is intuitively appealing, research has not always found it to be true. Pholsward (1985) found in tests of ESL reading comprehension with Economics students in Thailand that, while students said vocabulary constituted their biggest problem in comprehending text, test results showed that syntactic and discourse features of text were causing them more comprehension problems. Devine (1984) has shown that L2 readers come to the task of reading with different internalized models of the reading process which affect whether they focus on sounds, words, or global features of text. Hudson (1982), investigating where ESL learners “short-circuit” in the L2 reading process, found that an interruption in schema processing could cause a breakdown in linguistic processing. He also found that more advanced ESL learners were able to use compensatory strategies when reading to overcome areas of weakness, for example, knowledge of vocabulary. Johnson (1982), looking at ESL learners reading a culture-specific topic, found that background knowledge and cultural expectations had a greater effect on reading comprehension than knowledge of vocabulary.

Vocabulary may be a convenient label for any stumbling block in reading. Cavalcanti (1983) points out that vocabulary is often considered

by material designers to be a separate source of difficulty in L2 reading. However, words are components of the syntactic and discourse levels of language, and exactly what creates an obstacle to comprehension for the ESL learner might well be attributed to a “difficult word” even though the problem may be at the level of structural, discourse, or schema processing. For example, the “punch line” of a humorous text usually demands global text processing, yet the ESL learner sees only “the hard word”.

### **How can texts be simplified for ESL learners?**

Hetherington advocates a teacher-centred approach to the question of selecting and adapting reading materials, although she supports having students choose their own reading materials when this is possible. It is possible to have ESL learners choose many of their extensive reading texts, and they can even simplify short texts in intensive reading classes. Indeed, ESL learners, particularly adult learners, should be encouraged to take responsibility for the direction of their own learning.

Teacher-simplified materials are, of course, needed in certain classroom situations when all students have to read the same text, and that text is considered to be too linguistically demanding. However, there is a problem in advocating that particular sentence structures or vocabulary items be consistently avoided. This is unnatural, and, in any case, the ESL learner has to come to grips with the whole language, not just selected parts of it. Suggesting that the teacher delete “irrelevant information” (p. 47) from texts in order to simplify them might also be problematic. Information that one reader considers to be irrelevant might provide the needed background or redundancy to make that text clear or meaningful to another reader. The ESL teacher’s intuitive simplification of the text, rewriting difficult parts (e.g., long sentence with which tax the ESL learner’s memory) in clear and logically organized language, is preferable to either content abridgement or structurally defined linguistic simplification.

### **SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR LEARNER-CENTRED TEXT SELECTION AND SIMPLIFICATION**

ESL learners can be guided to simplify short texts of their own choosing. Students bring to class a text of 1 page or less which interests them and which they think they can read. This can be a newspaper article, report, essay, or short story, but the copy should be one they can mark on. Students then underline everything they do not understand in their texts and classify the underlined parts at the bottom of the page according to perceived problem in comprehension, e.g., new vocabulary, unknown

idiom, unclear sentence meaning. This can be done for homework or during class time. A text that is heavily underlined is too difficult for that learner at present. In manageable texts — those with not more than one or two underlined parts per paragraph — underlined problem areas can be discussed in pairs or small groups (even if different texts are used). Strategies for understanding the particular difficulties students had in understanding their texts can be taken up in class. Students then write their own version of the text according to their understanding of the original. This may range from a summary to a full-fledged rewrite.

ESL learners should also take some responsibility for choosing appropriate extensive reading texts. Extensive reading should provide ESL learners with the opportunity to pursue individual interests in reading. As long as they have access to a public library, students should be encouraged to seek out extensive reading materials which are personally motivating. Their purposes for reading, to learn about Canadian history, to understand how to assemble a model airplane, to follow a recipe, to appreciate modern poetry, together with their choice of subject matter, for example, natural science, financial advice, murder mysteries, daily news, will have a great bearing on the actual texts students choose for themselves in terms of content and genre. These materials can be discussed or presented in class, recommended to fellow students or panned, as the case may be, or simply read and returned with the knowledge that the teacher can help the student out with any particular difficulties.

ESL learners may not, however, automatically choose texts that are within their linguistic competence (Carrell & Wallace 1983), so the teacher should give students practice in judging the difficulty of a text using an intensive reading exercise such as the simplification task outlined above.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that ESL learners can tell us a great deal about what they find to be difficult about L2 reading (Aslanian 1985; Cavalcanti 1983; Cohen & Apek 1979; Cohen et al. 1979; Hosenfeld 1977; Lotherington 1984; Lotherington-Woloszyn 1986; Yorio 1971).

## **ARE SIMPLIFIED TEXTS HELPFUL?**

It must be recognized that simplifying language may not necessarily result in a text that is easier to read. Research about the comprehensibility of simplified texts is conflicting due, no doubt, to the enormous complexity of the reading process. Eskey (1970) points out that ESL students bred on simplified readers do not cope adequately with authentic college-level texts. Honeyfield (1977) surmises that the typical rhetorical “homogenization” of simplified texts encourages the ESL learners to acquire reading strategies not appropriate to the requirements of unsimplified text.

Bhatia (1983) advocates “easification”, or helping the learner to

develop appropriate, efficient reading strategies to deal with unsimplified text, rather than simplifying the text. Hosenfeld (1977) has mapped ESL students' successful reading strategies, using think-aloud protocols. These strategies are then shared and promoted in the classroom. Carrell (1984) makes excellent practical suggestions for focussing on "top-down" or schema-processing skills for ESL readers who rely too heavily on the linguistic information in texts, and "bottom-up" or linguistic decoding skills for students who depend too much on global information, missing text detail. These approaches to ESL reading concentrate on the reading process rather than on text difficulty.

## CONCLUSION

Recent research has shown that readability formulae are not extensively used in ESL text simplification. Educational publishers consider the features of the text, the characteristics of the ESL learner, and the educational market conditions in the production of simplified reading materials for ESL learners. However, it should be noted that texts simplified for L1 readers and promoted as being appropriate for ESL learners may be defined by readability criteria (Lotherington-Woloszyn 1986).

Vocabulary, while clearly a factor contributing to text difficulty, has not been conclusively shown to be *the* major factor affecting text difficulty. In a recent survey, educational publishers were found to consider 53 variables in the calculation of text difficulty for the preparation of simplified reading materials, of which vocabulary was one. Furthermore, research findings have shown background knowledge and cultural expectations (Johnson 1982), a breakdown in schema processing (Hudson 1982), different internalized models of the reading process (Devine 1984), and syntax and discourse features of text (Pholsward 1984) to contribute more to text difficulty than knowledge of vocabulary.

ESL teachers wanting to simplify texts in order to facilitate L2 reading for their students should follow the principles of clear, organized writing rather than attempting to abridge the content or to structurally simplify the language. The background knowledge assumed of the reader with each text should be discussed (before the text is read), and effective reading strategies should be made explicit and practised in intensive reading classes.

ESL learners must be allowed to reduce as many as possible of the potential hurdles of the L2 reader-text interaction. They should be encouraged to choose what is personally motivating to read, whenever possible, and ESL teachers should recognize this as an important step in facilitating L2 reading.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 The author gratefully acknowledges the support of SSHRC doctoral fellowship 452-85-4113 in preparing this paper.
- 2 These readers are widely distributed in Canada.

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#### **THE AUTHOR**

Heather Lotherington-Woloszyn is a doctoral candidate at O.I.S.E. She has taught ESL in Canada, Singapore and Papua New Guinea; and Applied Linguistics in England and Canada. She is the author of two simplified readers, and has collaborated in the writing of several ESL courses. She presently teaches at the English Language Institute, York University.