

CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.

Why Use Simplified Materials?¹

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This is the third article in a series of four brief texts on materials for teaching foreign language reading. In the first article, I challenged the assumption that *authentic* materials are preferable to other types of materials in teaching foreign language reading. I claimed that using authentic texts with beginning and intermediate students can impede foreign language reading development. The reason is, I argued, is that authentic texts are often too difficult. In the second article, I explained the process of developing simplified reading texts. In addition, I claimed that simplified materials are used for teaching foreign language reading for one inescapable reason: Beginning and intermediate foreign language students need them. In spite of this, simplified materials are often not seen as making a positive contribution to foreign language reading instruction.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of simplified materials in teaching foreign language reading. Let's start by looking at what some experts in foreign language reading have said about simplified materials.

Christine Nuttall writes, "'However good a simplification is, something is always lost; this is why some teachers refuse to use simplified versions'" (1996, p. 178). Francoise Grellet advises, "It is important to use authentic texts wherever possible." (1981, p. 7). Monica Vincent (1986, p. 212) observes, "Too many graded [r]eaders are pale imitations of original writing, in thin, stilted language, lacking all the linguistic, emotional, and aesthetic qualities that characterize real literature."

I agree that such criticism of simplified materials is accurate. The major problem or weakness of simplified materials is that they are poorly written. In addition, they are often uninteresting, hard to read, and lacking normal text features such as redundancy and cohesion. Many of these weaknesses are caused by the language itself or content of the text.

For language learners, difficult language is the problem with authentic texts. So rewriting authentic texts using simple language is sometimes considered the solution. Foreign language texts may be primarily written or adapted in terms of a linguistic formula based upon lists of words and grammar patterns that learners are expected to know. Unfortunately those who make authentic texts simple often focus their attention on vocabulary and grammar. This is in contrast to a process that writers should use, viz., focusing their attention on communicating with the readers.



Content problems can occur when attempts are made to simplify a complex original text. David Hill, reviewing the *Penguin Readers* series, gives one example. "In *Presumed Innocent*, 10 characters are introduced in the first chapter, three of them with nicknames, and incident follows incident in rapid staccato. The effect is often like a 33rpm record being played at 78rpm" (1995, p. 17).

Whatever the source of the problem, language or content, the result is the same. By focusing too much on simple language or the content of the original text, writers of simplified texts pay less attention to the essence of writing: communicating with an audience. This has led to the well-justified consensus that simplified material is not normal discourse (text written for communication), and, as a result, is not appropriate material for learning to read.

There is, however, one outstanding strength that simplified materials have: They are the best material for teaching beginning and intermediate students how to read in a foreign language. They are at the right linguistic level. In addition, simplified materials are short, and the beginning levels have illustrations as an aid in comprehension. Another strength of simplified materials for beginners is that the font size is generally a bit larger than normal, which helps comprehension.

I should also point out that not all simplified materials are terrible. Just like reading material written for an audience of first language readers, simplified material can be good, bad, or indifferent.

Where does this leave us? What material should we use to teach foreign language reading? Are there materials that can communicate with their audience of learners and, at the same time, are at the appropriate linguistic level?

I believe that there are such materials. And that genre of reading materials is the subject of the fourth and final article on reading materials for teaching foreign language reading.

References:

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Please take the time to give us the addresses of anyone else you think might be interested in receiving this newsletter of the CAPE Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk. And don't forget to write us with any comments you might have. Mahalo!

The above article is written for CAPE English Teacher Talk by Dr. Richard R. Day, Professor of SLS, University of Hawaii.
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ⁱ This is adapted from Day & Bamford (1998), Chapter 6.