READING AND ESL WRITERS

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Whether the student population consists of basic writers, non-native speakers, or well-prepared freshmen and whether the primary goal of the class is improvement in writing ability, language and vocabulary acquisition, or critical thinking skills, there is considerable evidence that substantial amounts of reading are an essential component of the course (See Krashen *Writing: Research, Theory and Applications* for a summary). This is especially true in the ESL composition class, where language acquisition is still a major factor in the student's success as a writer. Stephen Krashen's language acquisition theory holds that the primary factor in language acquisition is "comprehensible input," and that both the quality and the quantity of that input are important. How can we provide, in the context of a writing class, appropriate reading in sufficient *quantity* to have a significant effect on the language acquisition processes of our non-native speaking students? And what factors should we consider in assigning texts for our students to read, so that the *quality* of the texts is such that the input they provide is both comprehensible *and* challenging enough to increase the student's linguistic ability, while at the same time serving the intellectual purposes of the course?

Reporting on seven studies that investigated the effects of reading on writing ability, Stephen Krashen found these studies showed that good writers did more pleasure reading, read the newspaper more, and owned more books and magazines. With these observations in mind, on the first day of any writing class, I hand out a questionnaire which contains the following questions:

Not counting textbooks and other schoolwork, how many pages of *English* do you read each week?

a) none
b) 1-10 pages
c) 11-50 pages
d) 51-100 pages
e) more than 100 pages

It is most often the case that those who are reading more than 50 pages of English per week do well in the course, while those reading less than ten pages per week do poorly. In a study done at the University of Southern California, 54% of the 112 students who scored above 15 on a holistic writing exam (thus earning A's) reported reading 50 or more pages of English per week, while only 19% of the 153 students who scored 6 or below (thus earning D's or F's) reported that much reading.

Increasing Quantity

For this reason, one possible teaching strategy is to increase the *quantity* of reading that students do in the target language through self-selected reading of newspapers, magazines, and books combined with summaries and/or responses to the readings recorded in reading journals. Although students need to practice all types of reading, they often have been taught in ESL reading courses, either overtly or implicitly through the types of exercises they have been given, to read for *total comprehension*, a reading strategy which is usually appropriate only for classroom study or in crucial business and technical situations. *Scanning* for specific information, and *skimming* for general ideas are other important skills that contribute to language development.

The assignment below provides a relatively unobtrusive way to increase the quantity of reading each student does during the course. The procedure adapts easily to nearly any course structure or level, and specific assignments can be adapted to draw on the reading if the instructor desires. However, another option is simply to allow the reading to continue automatically throughout the course, independent of other assignments.

The Reading Program:

You will read three articles per week and write three short summaries and one personal response. You can read anything that

interests you in newspapers, or popular magazines. The summaries should have the following format:

1. Author ⎤
2. Title ⎟
3. Source ⎥——— This is bibliographic information.
4. Date an page number ⎦

5. Topic: (What is this article about?)
6. Summary: (What does the article say about the topic?)
7. Detail: (Is there any interesting or surprising detail or fact?)

The summaries do not have to be long. The above information usually fills about half a page. The bibliographic information is useful if you want to refer to the article in an essay, or if someone else wants to read it.

The personal response: In addition to the three summaries, you will write *one* personal response. In the summaries, you record only what the author of the article says, not your own opinion. The personal response is your opportunity to express what *you* think about one of the articles. You can disagree with the author, offer an opinion on policies or events, or speculate about future developments. If you have sufficient interest, this response may later be expanded into an essay.

Vocabulary development is probably the most obvious benefit of this reading, and most students, including native speakers, are anxious to increase their vocabularies. I introduce the assignment by discussing the concepts of passive and active vocabulary using the following chart:

UNKNOWN | PASSIVE   ▓   ACTIVE

- -

                   | ▓
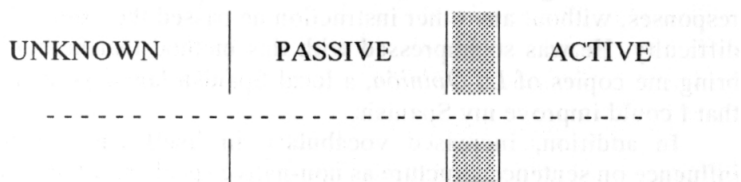
I explain to students that the process of language acquisition begins when we are born (or perhaps even before) and continues throughout our lives. We initially acquire words, grammatical forms, and syntactic structures from our social environment and later acquire them from reading. Every word starts out as unknown. Through numerous encounters, a word enters the passive vocabulary. Through further encounters, some words enter the active vocabulary. The

borderline area indicated by slashes above represents words that are in transition, words that may come to mind when you are writing or speaking, but about which you are unsure. In such cases they may want to consult a dictionary; however, many non-native speakers overuse dictionaries. In general, looking up words in a dictionary disrupts the natural reading process, and I tell students that they should look up a word only when they can't make sense of the article without a word's exact meaning.

We also discuss the possibility of memorizing a list of words for a special purpose, such as passing a vocabulary test. Students agree that a certain number of words can be memorized in this way, but that they disappear from memory soon after the test. I refer to the chart above and point out that such memorization is an attempt to bypass the natural acquisition process.
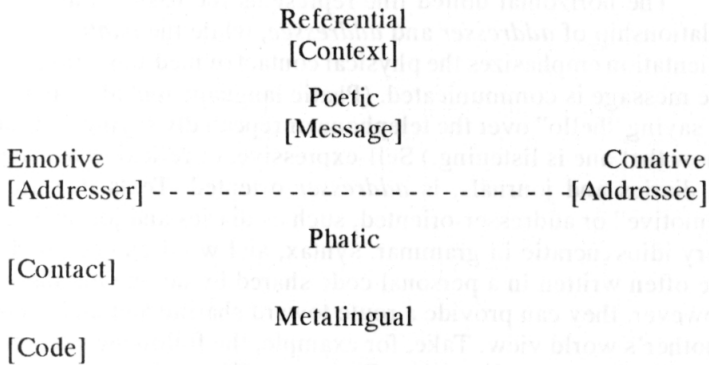
Other benefits accrue from this reading. Over a period of time students develop a background knowledge of current events and issues which allows them to respond in greater depth and with greater understanding in a number of different areas and disciplines. I once taught a Spanish-speaking engineer who had taken my university's freshman composition course more than five times without being able to pass the exit exam, a test which required students to read an article about a current issue or problem and respond to it with an essay. The student was so focused on engineering that he knew almost nothing about current events. Because his only usable information was that contained in the article he was responding to, he had no context or background with which to evaluate the author's arguments. After ten weeks of reading the *Los Angeles Times* and writing summaries and responses, without any other instruction he passed the exam with no difficulty. He was so impressed with this method that he began to bring me copies of *La Opinión*, a local Spanish language paper, so that I could improve my Spanish.

In addition, increased vocabulary in itself has a positive influence on sentence structure as non-native speakers often produce convoluted structures as they "write-around" words they don't have but need. Moreover, according to language acquisition theory, grammatical forms and concepts are also acquired through reading. Thus, grammar, syntax, content, and diction are all improved by the process of reading.

Assigning appropriate texts

It is possible to design a course in which *all* the reading is self-selected as in the ongoing summary and response assignment discussed above. Carefully chosen *assigned* readings add intellectual depth and challenge to a writing course and introduce students to the vocabulary and forms of new discourse communities. Although self-selected readings are usually fairly accessible, assigned readings can present a challenge carefully tailored to the needs and abilities of the students. In choosing these readings, we want to find texts that both serve the needs of the course and are *productively* difficult. A student's language ability increases as he or she struggles to comprehend that which is just out of reach. We want to ensure that the struggle is worthwhile and that what is gained is appropriate and useful. In this context the concept of an "effort-to-benefit ratio" is appropriate. How difficult will this text be for the student, and what is the cause or nature of the difficulty? What benefit will the student gain from struggling with this text? Is this gain worth the effort?

In order to situate these questions, linguist Roman Jakobson's framework for analyzing the purpose or function of a text is useful:

<div align="center">

Referential
[Context]

Poetic
[Message]

</div>

Emotive   Conative
[Addresser] -[Addressee]

<div align="center">

Phatic

</div>

[Contact]

<div align="center">

Metalingual

</div>

[Code]

<div align="center">

Jakobson's Schema
(In Winterowd *Contemporary Rhetoric* 3-8.)

</div>

Jakobson himself explains:

> The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to ("referent" in another, somewhat more ambiguous, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being

> verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and the decoder of the message); and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication. . . . Each of these six factors determines a different function of language. . ... We could, however, hardly find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function. . . . The verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the predominate function (Jakobson "Linguistics and Poetics" 353).

Thus every text performs a number of functions, perhaps all six of them, but each usually has a predominate orientation. In the following analysis, it is not my intent to argue that certain orientations are inappropriate to non-native speakers, but rather to use Jakobson's schema as a frame in which certain important difficulties are highlighted.

The horizontal dotted line represents the basic communicative relationship of *addresser* and *addressee*, while the *phatic* or channel orientation emphasizes the physical contact or medium through which the message is communicated. (Phatic language includes such things as saying "hello" over the telephone or repeatedly saying "uh-huh" to show that one is listening.) Self-expressive, or reflexive writing such as diaries and journals, is *addresser* oriented. Texts that are truly "emotive" or addresser-oriented, such as diaries and journals, can be very idiosyncratic in grammar, syntax, and word choice. Such texts are often written in a personal code shared by no one but the writer; however, they can provide a route toward sharing and understanding another's world view. Take, for example, the following excerpt from *The Black Notebooks* by Toi Derricotte. The writer has discovered that most of her neighbors belong to the Hartford Club, but that she cannot join because it has a policy of not accepting Blacks as members:

> & we were black & white together, we were middle class & we had "been to europe" & the doctors were black & the businessmen were white & the doctors were white & the businessmen were black & the bankers were there too.

& the black people sat on this side of the room & the
white people sat on that & they ate cherried chocolates with
dainty fingers & told stories.

& soon i found that one couple belonged to the
Hartford Club & my heart closed like my eyes narrowing
on that corner of the room on that conversation like a beam
of light & they said "it isn't our fault. it's the man who owns
it." & i was angry & i said it is your fault for you belong &
no one made you & suddenly i wanted to belong i wanted
them to let me in or die & wanted to go to court to battle to
let crosses burn on my lawn let anything happen they will
i will go to hell i will break your goddamned club apart
don't give me shit anymore (In Miller *The Written World*
192).

Although this text presents itself as a journal entry, it is quite possible
the writer had the larger audience implied by publication in mind all
along, a possibility that exists with any published diary or journal.
However, this possibility does not reduce the usefulness of this text
for our present purpose. The unconventional punctuation and syntax,
the shifts of point of view, and the unexplained references to burning
crosses and "going to Europe" make this a difficult text for non-native
speakers to comprehend. One could also argue that reading a lot of
such material could reinforce oral language patterns that would hinder
the student's ability to write more formal standard English. On the
other hand, the text provides very persuasive access to the writer's
inner world, her feelings, and her personal experience of a difficult
and important social problem. In determining whether the effort to
benefit ratio indicates that this text is appropriate, all of these factors
must be considered.

At the other end of the communicative relationship are
addressee-oriented texts, which include the argumentative and
persuasive texts that are the staple of freshman composition. These
are usually thought to be among the easiest to deal with, because the
writer has taken special care to consider the reader. However, the
rhetorical assumptions made by the writer may not hold for the reader
from another culture. Take, for example, a commonly anthologized
essay by Judy Syfers called "I Want a Wife." Syfers identifies herself
as belonging "to that classification of people known as wives." Then
she relates a story about a divorced male friend who is looking for a
new wife and says that her conversation with that friend convinced

her that she too needs a wife. The main part of the essay goes on as follows:

> I want a wife who will take care of *my* physical needs. I want a wife who will keep my house clean. A wife who will pick up after my children, a wife who will pick up after me. I want a wife who will keep my clothes clean, ironed, mended, replaced when need be, and who will see to it that my personal things are kept in their proper place so that I can find what I need the minute I need it. I want a wife who cooks the meals, a wife who is a *good* cook. I want a wife who will plan the menus, do the necessary grocery shopping, prepare the meals, serve them pleasantly, and then do the cleaning up while I do my studying. I want a wife who will care for me when I am sick and sympathize with my pain and loss of time from school. I want a wife to go along when our family takes a vacation so that someone can continue to care for me and my children when I need a rest and change of scene (Nadell and Langan *Macmillan Reader* 433).

The essay proceeds by accumulation of such detail, covering sexual and social arrangements, childcare, and all other aspects of domestic life. The author finishes by observing "My God, who *wouldn't* want a wife?"

Many foreign students are truly puzzled by this essay. If they notice that the author is a woman, they tend to forget after reading half way through. Or if they remember, they sometimes ask if the author is a homosexual. Some students read it as a straightforward list of the proper duties of a wife without detecting any irony at all. Without a fairly sophisticated knowledge of American domestic relations and the impact that economic and social changes have had on the family and the status of women, Syfer's rhetorical strategy doesn't work.

The difficulty above is related to the problem of context, the orientation of expository texts. Cultural differences create differences in context. Non-native speakers may fill in a different context than the writer expected. Although the instructor can negotiate these differences, context *is* a factor in choosing texts. How explicitly is the context defined? Is it clear what sort of world the text refers to? How much do the readers in the class know about this world? Of course, learning about a different world may be exactly the reason for using

such a text, but if the context is exotic to the students and learning about the world represented in the text is peripheral to the purposes of the course, that text may not be the best choice.

The world of the text may be exotic because it is fictional, different in culture, or removed from the student in time. Standard composition readers are full of selections that are problematic in this way. Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is perhaps the most common. Swift's satirical essay poses problems of archaic style and vocabulary, combined with the rhetorical difficulty of sustained irony, which students often miss. However, the most serious difficulty is probably Swift's worldview because his irony becomes apparent only when the common opinions are known.

Swift's subtitle is "For Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public." He employs arguments which appear to be logical and performs calculations which appear to be accurate and reasonable, but he also makes emotional and moral appeals. He asserts that his scheme will

> prevent those voluntary abortions, and the horrid practice of women murdering their bastard children, alas, too frequent among us, sacrificing the poor innocent babes, I doubt, more to avoid the expense than the shame, which would move tears and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast (Nadell and Langan *Macmillan Reader* 580).

His actual proposal, however, appears to utterly contradict these sentiments.

> I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in fricassee or a ragout (581).

Swift's strategy is to invoke common opinions and connect them through logical means to an abhorrent solution. The process by which the Irish poor are dehumanized is inherent in the value systems Swift is manipulating. However, can a non-native speaker, struggling with the vocabulary and syntax, and unfamiliar with this history and this time, comprehend what Swift intends?

Perhaps the clearest indication of this problem is the reference to an American in the second passage. Are Americans accustomed to eating children? In Swift's time America was still a colony and a frontier, its inhabitants considered to be savage and uncultured by the sophisticated English. Swift's reference is thus an amusing exaggeration of common opinion. A foreign student reading this today, however, would simply be further perplexed.

The problems of reference and audience found in the Syfers and Swift selections exacerbate the problems non-native speaking students have in dealing with the syntax and vocabulary of the texts. The traditional response to these difficulties has been to subject non-native speakers to large amounts of metalinguistic *code*-oriented discourse—language about language—through glosses, vocabulary lists, grammar handbooks, rhetorics, and instructor's annotations to their written work. Jakobson's schema reminds us that this orientation is outside the basic communicative relationship of addresser and addressee. This is the type of discourse that Krashen's language acquisition theory finds ineffective in increasing language proficiency because it is directed toward conscious learning and analysis rather than natural acquisition. In metalinguistic discourse, reference, form, and ultimately meaning are treated as hypothetical and abstract, disconnected from the world and its events.

Metalinguistic discourse is not limited, however, to grammars and workbooks. Traditional essay collections contain a lot of it. Consider, for example, the following paragraph from "The Meaning of 'Normal'" by Joseph Wood Krutch.

> The words we choose to define or suggest what we believe to be important facts exert a very powerful influence upon civilization. . . . It is for this reason that, even as a mere verbal confusion, the use of "normal" to designate what ought to be called "average" is of tremendous importance and serves not only to indicate but actually to reinforce the belief that average ability, refinement, intellectuality, or even virtue is an ideal to be aimed at. Since we cannot do anything to the purpose until we think straight and since we cannot think straight without properly defined words, it may be that the very first step toward an emancipation from the tyranny of "conformity" should be the attempt to substitute for "normal," as

> commonly used, a genuine synonym for "average"
> (Levin *Prose Models* 64).

Here the quotation marks indicate the metalinguistic use of language, the use of a word as a word or a signifier. Krutch makes a distinction in meaning between "normal" and "average" that may be too subtle for a non-native speaker, and since he also indicates that the fate of civilization rests upon distinctions of this type, such a student is likely to become insecure about his or her language use. Because it often deals with correctness and the consequences of making a mistake, metalinguistic discourse often has this effect.

The issues made visible by the *code* orientation, are, however, important to consider when assigning student texts. While problems of code—specifically vocabulary and syntax—are central to the concerns of an ESL reading teacher, they are all too often ignored when college-level instructors choose readings for their courses.

In *The Psychology of Reading* , Taylor and Taylor argue in favor of a "Bilateral Cooperative" model of the reading process, which involves two entirely separate processes or "tracks" for decoding meaning:

> The two tracks are connected at a few discrete levels
> but otherwise are independent. The RIGHT track
> works by global pattern matching and association,
> ultimately linking the sense of the items to the state
> of the real world; the LEFT works by analysis and
> rules, selecting appropriate pattern matches
> developed by the RIGHT and inhibiting inappropriate
> ones. The LEFT track is responsible for syntactic
> relations and phonetic coding of words (234).

According to Taylor and Taylor, "Neither RIGHT nor LEFT track can recognize words well. The LEFT is slow, the RIGHT careless. Jointly, they work well and quickly" (249). And they argue that when there are no RIGHT candidates, as would be the case in a text which consists of unfamiliar or nonsense words, "the speed will be just that of the slow LEFT processing" (250). This means that if most of the words in the text are unfamiliar, the reader must rely almost entirely on slow, left brain processes, and may even have to resort to the dictionary. This sort of reading is more like translating than actual reading. Real reading requires a critical mass of knowledge to get the processes started. Known words establish a context for unknown words. If there

are too many unknown words, no context is established, and the mind plods ahead grammatically.

In Jakobson's terms, the left track is what he calls "the axis of combination," while the right track is "the axis of selection." Jakobson argues that "any linguistic sign involves two modes of arrangement:"

> (1) COMBINATION. Any sign is made of constituent signs and/or occurs only in combination with other signs. this means that any linguistic unit at one and the same time serves as a context for simpler units and/or finds its own context in a more complex linguistic unit. Hence any actual grouping of linguistic units binds them into a superior unit . . .

> (2) SELECTION. A selection between alternatives implies the possibility of substituting one for the other, equivalent to the former in one respect and different from it in another (Jakobson and Halle *Fundamentals of Language* 74).

Combination primarily involves syntactical and grammatical relationships, which create larger and larger units. Selection involves word choice. Each word which is selected resonates with those which might have been selected, but were not. Krutch's argument that we are confusing "normal" with "average," cited above, is a good example of a problem in selection. Jakobson argues that these two operations provide each linguistic sign with two sets of interpretants, a reference to the code and a reference to the context. Jakobson applies this idea to his famous study of aphasia, in which two different types of language disorder are identified—the "similarity disorder" characterized by an ability to understand grammatical relationships, but a problem with understanding a word out of context, and the "contiguity disorder," in which strings of words can be generated, but grammatical and syntactic relationships are lost (Jakobson and Halle *Fundamentals* 77-89). It could be argued that giving a non-native student an inappropriate text results in a type of temporary text-induced aphasia.

The difference between passive understanding of a word and an active ability to use it is mostly a matter of having acquired mastery of the associative connotations. Taylor and Taylor argue that association is a RIGHT track function "The associations of a word, rather than its dictionary definition, carry most of its meaning. To

understand a word in context is to select the correct pattern of associates relating to that context" (255).

The problem of unknown vocabulary and association is compounded when words are used metaphorically. Taylor and Taylor define metaphor as "the use of words in a nonliteral sense, taking a few of the features of the words to suggest something quite different from their literal sense" (263). Clearly a text with a high percentage of unknown words which are used in a metaphorical fashion will not be "productively" difficult for the non-native speaking student.

For all the above reasons, in evaluating a text in terms of its vocabulary, care should be taken that the ratio of known to unknown words be acceptable (I would guess about 70/30 for most purposes). It is also helpful if the unknown words are *useful*. For example, I once showed a film of a Hawthorne story called "Doctor Heidegger's Experiment" to a very proficient ESL reading class. The film gave the students access to the world of the story, and knowledge of the basic events, so that when they read the story they had little trouble following it, even considering Hawthorne's rather complex nineteenth century style and vocabulary. However, reading and discussing the story taught them the word "visage," clearly one of Hawthorne's favorite words, which I then had to advise them not to use because it is an archaic word that is no longer in common use.

A literary text such as the Hawthorne story invokes what Jakobson calls the poetic or *message*-oriented function, which can be described as an orientation toward message for its own sake. However, we must understand what he means by "message." Jonathan Culler explains:

> By "message" Jakobson does not, of course, mean "propositional content" (that is stressed by the referential function of language) but simply the utterance itself as a linguistic form. In Murakovsky's words, "the function of poetic language consists in the maximum foregrounding of the utterance." Foregrounding may be accomplished in various ways, including the use of deviant or ungrammatical constructions, but for Jakobson the principal technique is the use of highly patterned language (Culler *Structuralist Poetics* 56).

Fiction and poetry are *message* oriented, but Jakobson does not limit this function to poetry, or even to literary texts. He says, "Any attempt to reduce the sphere of poetic function to poetry or to confine poetry

to poetic function would be a delusive oversimplification. . . . This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects" (356). Thus, such a text emphasizes language as *language*, and distances the sign from any reference to an object or a world. The poetry of e. e. cummings is a clear example of the kind of text which calls attention to itself as a linguistic artifact, but any literary text has this tendency.

It is the message-oriented text, the poetic text in which the language is patterned in ways that go beyond grammatical and rhetorical concerns, that provides the most difficulty for non-native speakers. Any text which calls attention to its linguistic form through grammatical, lexical, or stylistic deviance is likely to create problems for the non-native speaking student. Such texts often manipulate the code in unconventional ways in order to squeeze the last drop of meaning out of the words. (Imagine a non-native speaker trying to process that last metaphor.) If the best thing about a text is the wonderfully clever way it manipulates the resources of the language, it is probably not the right text for even a fairly sophisticated non-native speaker.

In this essay I have pointed out problems which derive from specific orientations of discourse. It has not been my intent to argue that a particular orientation should be avoided by teachers of non-native speakers, or that certain texts should *never* be taught to such a group. Rather, I have attempted to clarify the issues which arise in making choices about what texts to assign to non-native speaking students, so that certain types of problems can be avoided, or at least more clearly addressed. Jakobson's categories, once invoked, provide a clarifying view, a perspective from distance, which can be abandoned once the insights have been gained. When we read, and when students read, we have a different focus. Clearly, however, we must read.

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