

Scaffolding Reading Skills Using Authentic Texts: Suggestions for IUJ's Intensive English Program

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Abstract

This paper offers suggestions for improving the reading skills aspect of the Text Skills component of International University of Japan's Intensive English Program. In order to prepare students for graduate studies, proper scaffolding of authentic texts is necessary for short-term and long-term goals. Text Skills course designers should consider including key strategies for reading comprehension that students use, perhaps unconsciously in their first language (L1), but don't immediately know how to transfer into their second language (L2).

Key words: Reading skills, reading activities, authentic text, scaffolding text.

1. INTRODUCTION

Authentic texts may contain language that far exceeds the level of students' comprehension ability. Typically, teachers will modify the language in authentic texts for students with lower levels of language proficiency. What happens when a teacher cannot simply modify the text because of syllabus design constraints? This is the situation some instructors of the Text Skills course faced in the Intensive English Program (IEP) at the International University of Japan (IUJ) in Niigata, Japan.

In Text Skills, students are presented with texts that contain information on topics such as economics, marketing, and international trade. The articles come from sources such as *The Economist* and content course textbooks. The readings are believed to be representative of the kind of material students will encounter in their graduate studies at institutions in Japan such as IUJ, Hitotsubashi University, Yokohama University and The National Graduate Institute of Policy Studies (GRIPS).

In selecting reading materials, past Text Skills coordinators seem to have taken a design similar to Content-Based Language Instruction (CBI). CBI is based on the premise that language use is not the ultimate goal. Learning language is important inasmuch as it can lead a student to learn other things; in the case of the IEP, students will go on to study in areas such as business or

economics. Because the IEP is only eight weeks, students need meaningful content that will help them achieve academic success in their content courses.

The eight-week Intensive English Program hosts students from various countries. These students are sponsored by organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), as well as Japanese companies. Although the material was suitable for the IEP's principal constituency, International Monetary Fund (IMF) scholarship students, not all students in the 2007 IEP would continue to study economics or business. The 2007 IEP hosted seven Niigata-ken junior and senior high school English teachers. This new constituency called into question the usefulness and validity of the reading packet as these students could not directly benefit from the previous CBI model.

In addition to the issue of having Niigata-ken English teachers in the IEP, there were also a significant number of students that could be considered below the English proficiency standard for English-medium graduate studies. These students would struggle immensely with the readings assigned. Before the start of the IEP, students were required to take a model version of the TOEFL exam for the sponsors to measure student progress. In Text Skills, instructors used the results not as a placement test but to create two 'low-level proficiency' groups.

The students in the two 'low-level proficiency' groups struggled significantly with assigned readings. In a highly coordinated program like the IUJ IEP, the students in all sections had to cover the same material at the same intensive pace. In these two groups, students used dictionaries frequently throughout the reading activities to make sense of the passages. Students in these groups often failed to grasp the main ideas of the article before moving to new material.

One student in particular was markedly lower in English language proficiency than the rest of the group. Despite our placement of this student in the lower-level Text Skills class, he still struggled immensely. The student worked diligently, translating the text word for word, yet was still unable to contribute to small-group discussions. Despite this student's class having a smaller class size of eleven students, his presence further complicated the use of authentic texts in the classroom.

As these challenges suggest, careful scaffolding of these authentic texts was essential. However, a focus on reading skills seemed to be missing in the Text Skills component of the IEP. In order to better serve the needs of the multiple interests in the IUJ IEP, it is necessary to reevaluate the support currently provided to the authentic materials used in the Text Skills

reading packet. Authentic readings should be accompanied with additional scaffolding to assist faculty with the teaching of reading skills (e.g. skimming, scanning) that students will need in their graduate studies.

2. SCAFFOLDING AUTHENTIC TEXTS

2.1 Pre-reading strategies

With lower-level proficiency students, previewing and pre-reading activities become particularly important for comprehension of IEP Text Skills material. According to Aebersold and Field (1997), there are several questions a teacher should ask before embarking on a reading task:

- a. What is the students' level of knowledge about the topic?
- b. What is students' level of interest in the topic? Is the topic motivating enough to encourage students to read despite their low level proficiency?
- c. How difficult is the vocabulary? Grammar?
- d. What do students know about what type of text they are reading?
- e. How well can students transfer L1 reading strategies to L2 texts?
- f. How much time is available for the activity?
- g. Considering the above questions, what are the most useful methods for achieving classroom objectives?

As detailed in Appendix A, students were asked to preview the text, followed by general pre-reading strategies. Previewing allows students to make a mental image of what information they are going to find in the text. Students may use the following information to preview a text: title, author/source, subtitles, photographs, figures/tables and even print that is different in size, bold faced, or italicized.

According to Aebersold and Field (1997), providing students with repetition at all stages of reading development is essential. Without reading the text, students might start an activity by looking at the title and brainstorming what vocabulary they might find in the reading. New vocabulary could be written on the blackboard. After this brainstorming activity, another pre-reading strategy that could be used with the 'low-level proficiency' group is identifying keywords in the article before class and assigning these for homework. Later, students could compare their vocabulary lists. Students could also review keywords in the text and talk about their usage, form, and collocation. Finally, students could record the keywords, usually no more

than ten words, into their notebooks. The personal dictionary might have headings that look like that provided in Figure 1.

| Word | Line # | Sentence from reading | Definition (Collins Cobuild) | Your sentence |
|------|--------|-----------------------|------------------------------|---------------|
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

Figure 1. Pre-reading vocabulary building exercise.

The instructor might begin by asking students to preview the text by looking at the title, author/source, subtitles, and subheadings. After activating students' background knowledge, the instructor could ask students to predict the content of the text. While students are eliciting responses, the instructor could write these ideas on the blackboard using a variety of models such as Venn diagrams or 'spider-web' diagrams. These diagrams provide students with useful mental images of the relationship of ideas and vocabulary.

Next, students could perform several pre-reading activities. First, students might read only the introduction, the first sentence of each of the body paragraphs, and the conclusion carefully. Students could then skim the entire text in order to get the gist of the article followed by scanning in which students looked for transition words and keywords. By skimming and scanning, students might be able to determine if their predictions were accurate.

Instructors need not attempt all of these pre-reading strategies with each text. In fact, student motivation will be higher by offering different strategies for each reading. For example, one reading could focus on activating student background information, while another reading could require students to preview the text. Another reading might ask students to establish a purpose for reading the text. This varied approach to pre-reading could keep the previewing strategies interesting. Furthermore, it would provide students with an arsenal of different previewing and pre-reading strategies that could be used during their graduate studies.

2.2 During-reading strategies

For students' benefit, the instructor should provide a mix of bottom-up and top-down strategies to teach reading skills. The instructor could choose from a variety of bottom-up

strategies such as sentence-level comprehension checks, vocabulary checks, and monitoring use of transition signals. Students might do prediction activities to discuss what ideas might come next in the reading. After making several predictions, students might guess the main idea of each paragraph. Students could mark the main idea with a pencil or, if the main idea wasn't explicitly stated, students might formulate the main idea in their own words. Top-down strategies such as activating student's background knowledge can assist comprehension. In addition, instructors could focus students' attention on paragraphs or larger sections of text to gain larger meaning. I asked students to break up a reading into sections. For example, instructors might ask students to examine only the introduction. Then, the students could examine the body paragraphs. How are the paragraphs linked together? Are they divided according to content? Lastly, the students might look at the conclusion. Of course, the instructor would have the flexibility to choose the order in which students examine the text.

Instructors can also introduce strategies for guessing the meaning of words. The first step in this strategy is determining the part of speech. Is the word a noun? An adjective? A verb? If students are not familiar with these terms, now might be a good time for the instructor to review this classroom English with students as they will encounter these words frequently throughout the IEP. Second, instructors could tell students to examine the words near the word being examined. Is there an adjective or adverb describing the word? If the unknown word was a noun, what verb did it go with? If the word is a verb, what noun does it go with? Lastly, instructors could ask students what the relationship of the clause or sentence containing the unknown word and other sentences is. Is there a conjunction or subordinator? Does the relationship indicate cause and effect? Compare and contrast? Summary?

Instructors might encourage students to do self-monitoring during their reading. Self-monitoring is the process by which students periodically stop and ask themselves questions such as: Why am I reading this? Do I understand what I am reading? What strategies am I using to understand? Appendix D contains an example of this process. The left column of Appendix D provides the reading text, while the right column provides examples of student self-monitoring.

Instructors could also ask students to read a single paragraph, stop, and as a group predict what the following paragraph might discuss based on the content of the paragraph, students personal knowledge of the topic, or clues provided in the title. Another bottom-up strategy instructors might use for during-reading is asking students to identify transition words while

reading. What clues do the transition words give us about the relationship of ideas in the passage? Students need to ask questions about the transition signals such as: Does the signal indicate a change in the kind of information? Does the signal indicate new information? Does the signal indicate a conclusion? Instructors might refer students to the complete list of transition words in Appendix C of *Writing Academic English* (Oshima & Hogue, 2006, pp. 291-299).

Lastly, instructors can encourage students to be active readers and read with their pencils. Students underline or circle anything in the text that they feel is interesting, important, or unclear. Instructors might utilize examples from their own books to show students how to make comments in the margins of texts. An instructor's reading diary/notebook with notes of texts could also be an invaluable example for students. This practice of keeping a detailed reading diary/notebook not only assists comprehension and retention of the information given in the text, but also assists students in avoiding plagiarism because the notes have been paraphrased from the original text. By reading actively in this way, students can engage more fully with their text. During the summer IEP, students should discuss these during-reading strategies and the benefits of stopping while reading with the instructor to examine their own processes and strategies of reading comprehension.

2.3 Post-reading strategies

After reading, instructors might ask students to get into pairs or small groups to outline and summarize the main points and supporting details of the text. In last year's IEP Text Skills reading packet, readings were supported with comprehension questions (See Appendix C). Students were often given the reading and comprehension questions for homework. In class, students reviewed their answers in pairs or small groups. After reviewing their answers in pairs, they answered the questions as a group. The instructor required students to not only give their answer, but also provide a rationale for their answer. By using this approach, the instructor could confirm that the students had actively engaged with the text.

As detailed in Appendix C, written homework comprehension questions was one strategy that has been used consistently in previous IEPs at IUJ. One style of question common in the Text Skills comprehension questions was matching titles to paragraphs (See Appendix C, Question #1). This is a good exercise in establishing what the main idea of each paragraph is. Content-related questions in the readings were valuable for evaluating student knowledge and

comprehension of the text. Although the questions were quite good at measuring student knowledge and comprehension of the text, more questions that apply what the students know in their daily lives to the reading, more analysis and synthesis of information, and more evaluative style of questioning in which students can question the validity of the statements in the article could be useful to their future work in English-medium graduate education.

After reading, metacognition activities can be used to get students to think about their reading strategies. In other words, the instructor might ask students to think about how they think. The instructor can ask students to examine what strategies they used, how they used these strategies, and other questions to get students to think about their learning. In addition, reading logs are a useful tool for students. Reading logs provide students with an outlet to voice any frustrations they might have with a reading. The instructor can ask students to include problematic vocabulary or grammar structures in this log, too. By recording this information, students can engage the text more deeply and can use the log for future reference.

One activity that worked very well in the past for post-reading comprehension was the take-home summary assignment. The summaries were, in essence, a test of student comprehension of a text. Summaries require students to synthesize and analyze the content of the text. In future IEPs it might be beneficial to add shorter summary activities that can be conducted in class as part of the comprehension questions following each reading.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important that the instructor be an active role model for students. In order to assist students' reading comprehension, it is very important for the instructor to be an active participant in the classroom reading community. Although not an expert in economics or finance, the instructor has to be ready to direct students to the appropriate answers in the reading text. It is important for the language faculty in the summer IEP to understand that our purpose is not to replace content faculty but to organize authentic texts and scaffold the material in ways that can maximize students' success in their graduate studies.

In the future, IEP organizers may want to base the reading component on models such as Chamot and O'Malley's (1994, as cited in Anderson, 1999, p. 71) model known as Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). This approach consists of the following: (1)

selecting the content topics; (2) developing academic language skills; and (3) implementing *explicit* instruction of learning strategies for both language and content courses.

Based on Peregoy and Boyle's (1997, as cited in Anderson, 1999, p. 46) model of CBI, when planning for next year's IEP reading component, the following six criteria should be satisfied:

1. **Meaning and purpose:** Is the material meaningful to students? Did students have an opportunity to choose and/or develop the readings used in the classroom?
2. **Prior knowledge:** Does the lesson utilize students' previous knowledge as a foundation on which to build?
3. **Opportunities to use language:** Does the reading packet design offer students an opportunity to use language learned in the readings in a productive way, for example, take-home writing assignments?
4. **Scaffolding:** Are lessons properly planned to maximize student learning? Are there appropriate pre-, during-, and post-reading activities?
5. **Collaboration:** Are there opportunities for students to share knowledge with peers and build knowledge in a community?
6. **Variety:** Is there sufficient diversity of pedagogical approaches (e.g. pair-work, group-work, guest speakers, etc.) to maximize student learning?

With further consideration of the goals of the reading component, we can improve material usefulness for all levels, including low-proficiency groups. IEP organizers should seek to replace some of the material for texts that would be interesting for the various constituencies now participating in IEP such as the Niigata-ken junior and senior high school English teachers. For example, articles about education as it relates to development, management, or economics might be interesting to both Niigata-ken English teachers and students that will study international affairs. IEP organizers could find several articles on the same topic and use the articles' differences to compare and contrast the different writing styles of the articles.

Finding readings that appeal to the different constituencies in the IEP as well as to the different proficiency levels as evidenced by the two 'low-proficiency' Text Skills classes is one of the biggest challenges facing the IEP Text Skills course. In future IEPs, we may consider introducing individual reports for summary or essay assignments in which students have the flexibility to choose their own reading for one of the Take-Home Assignments. As an in-class activity, to prevent students with backgrounds in economics from dominating class discussion, students could make pairs and 'exchange' their individual report with another student, creating an opportunity for every student to be an 'expert' or 'teacher.'

IEP 2008 Text Skills instructors will have to utilize various reading strategies to help students attain different short-term and long-term goals. Instructors should be able to maintain high student motivation if the authentic texts are properly scaffolded by different reading activities and strategies.

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APPENDIX A

IEP 2007 Text Skills, Section C Reading Strategies

I. Text

1. Preview a text (Title, author/source, subtitles, subheadings, etc.)
 - a. Activate previous knowledge
2. Pre-reading strategies
 - a. Read the introduction & conclusion carefully.
 - b. Skim the text
 - c. Read the first sentence of each of the body paragraphs to see what ideas are mentioned. (Sampling)
 - d. Scan for specific information (multiple choice).
3. Reading strategies
 - a. First, use skimming, scanning, and sampling strategies.
 - b. Read with your pencil/pen. Highlight main ideas, 'key nouns'.
 - c. Prediction (What will come in the next paragraph?). Look for transition signals.

II. Quiz Sheet

1. Preview titles in 'Quiz Sheet'
 - a. Write the titles in question form. What would an appropriate answer be?
 - b. Look at the vocabulary in the titles. Did you find synonyms among the 'key words'?
 - c. Do not dwell on a single item for too much time. Go on to the next question if you do not know the answer.
 - d. At the end of the quiz, take a guess. Do not leave spaces blank!

III. Problematic Vocabulary

1. What part of speech is this word? (e.g. Noun? Verb? Adjective?)
2. Are there any adjectives/adverbs that describe this word?
3. Look for transition signals. What is the relationship of this word to other words?
4. Replace the unknown word with a word that might mean something similar. Does the sentence make sense?
5. Break the unknown word into its prefix, root, and suffix. (e.g. pre-dic-tion)

APPENDIX B

Waves of Fear

The Economist January 11, 2007, U.K. Edition

(this text has been slightly edited)

- A. For years now, free trade and free movement of capital have been respectable economic tenets, espoused — if sometimes reluctantly — by most politicians. However, no sane politician in the rich world would advocate the free movement of labour. As a result, most people are trapped in their native lands, never likely to have a legal opportunity to see the world outside.
- B. Philippe Legrain, a liberal economist who once worked for *The Economist*, has already written a book stoutly defending globalisation*. Now he takes on an even more emotive subject. There is not a shadow of doubt about his own views: he wants open borders. He believes that they will, on balance, enrich both sending and receiving countries; he thinks diversity generally makes life more interesting; and he detests bureaucratic restrictions on human freedoms. “Immigrants are not an invading army,” he points out. “They come in search of a better life. They are no different to someone who moves from Manchester to London, or Oklahoma to California, because that is where the jobs are, except that a border lies in the way.”
- C. Mr Legrain has assembled powerful evidence to undermine the economic arguments against immigration. In the case of skilled migrants, that is relatively easy, but the migrants who arrive in the back of lorries and huddled in small boats are unskilled. For them, there are hardly any legal routes across borders. Yet, argues Mr Legrain, they too bring economic benefits and do “little or no harm” to the wages or employment prospects of native workers. As for the economic impact on sending countries, many of them now gain more from remittances than from official aid or inward investment. He quotes approvingly a government minister from the Philippines, who says: “Overseas employment has built more homes, sent more children of the poor to college and established more business enterprises than all the other programmes of the government put together.”
- D. Mr Legrain makes a robust economic case — though he surely understates the impact of immigrants on holding back the pay of the poorest, often themselves the children of immigrants. He is more successful at rebutting the argument that taxpayers give willingly only to those with whom they feel some kinship and that immigration, therefore, jeopardises support for the welfare state. A willingness to pay taxes to support the poor is independent of levels of immigration, he shows.
- E. Less convincing are his proposals for encouraging immigrants to go home after a period of working abroad. If immigration were temporary, he reasons, people might tolerate it more readily. Therefore, he suggests, for instance, that immigrants should post a bond on arrival or have a portion of their wages withheld until they leave. The trouble with such ingenious ideas is that immigrants from the world's poorer countries have many reasons to stay overseas, especially in Europe or America. The financial gains are huge, but they are by no

means the only rewards. Life is much easier where there is the rule of law, less petty corruption, and a better health-care system than exists at home.

- F. However, hostility to immigration is not just, or indeed mainly, about economics. It is based on fear of change and on racism. It has also, since the World Trade Centre attacks, been based on growing worries about Muslim terrorism. Such anxieties are not easily assuaged by economic logic. It is striking, for example, how little serious protest there was in Britain at the absorption of over 500,000 east European immigrants in the two years after Poland and nine other countries acceded to the European Union in May 2004. Surely at least one reason was that these white Christian Europeans look and (seem to) think extraordinarily like most British people, and their children and grandchildren will be distinguishable only by their unpronounceable names.
- G. By contrast, many Muslim immigrants and their children have become more estranged, not less. Their ambivalence towards the West and its secular liberalism has appeared to grow, not diminish. It is, of course, wholly unreasonable to see most Muslims as potential terrorists — but reason may not have much chance here.
- H. Thus, no government in the rich world is likely to open its borders to all comers, as Mr Legrain urges. For politicians, the tricky questions are who to let in and how to define a coherent policy. The harsh truth is that voters find it easier to accept immigrants who look and behave as they do than those who are different. That attitude, as a basis for policy, still results in leaving most of mankind outside the gates.

767 words

* *Immigrants: Your Country Needs Them*. By Philippe Legrain. Little, Brown, 2007.

APPENDIX C

Reading Assignment (RS draft HW reading 2007)

“Waves of Fear,” *The Economist*, January 11, 2007.

Comprehension Questions

The following questions are designed to help you understand and summarize the article. Except for the first question, the questions are organized to deal with important details from the beginning of the article to its end. In other words, the questions generally follow the order of the paragraphs. For the last two questions, you may have to think about the whole article.

1. Match each of the following topics with the appropriate paragraph. Write the letter of the paragraph next to the topic.
 - a. Persuasive economic arguments
 - b. Fear and the movement of labour
 - c. Borders will probably not be opened
 - d. Unpersuasive arguments
 - e. No assimilation for one immigrant group in the West
 - f. Partly persuasive arguments
 - g. Global labour forced to stay at home
 - h. Clear views about the movement of labour
2. According to the article, what are the basic reasons Phillippe Legrain gives in support of the free movement of labor?
3. According to the article, what are the detailed economic reasons Phillippe Legrain gives in support of the free movement of labor?
4. According to the article, why is temporary immigration an unrealistic policy?
5. The article refers to fear of change and to racism as important factors in creating hostility to racism. Is this a reference to the opinion of Phillippe Legrain or the opinion of the article’s author? What is the reason for your answer?
6. According to the article, why are there anxieties about Muslim immigrants in the West?
7. According to the article, will a majority of people in the world be able to emigrate to the West? What are the reasons the article gives?
8. In your opinion, is the tone of the article optimistic or pessimistic?
9. In Paragraph A, the article refers indirectly to the “sanity” of politicians in the rich world. What does this mean?

APPENDIX D

READING TEXT

Waves of Fear

The Economist January 11, 2007, U.K. Edition

(this text has been slightly edited)

- A. For years now, free trade and free movement of capital have been respectable economic tenets, espoused — if sometimes reluctantly — by most politicians. However, no sane politician in the rich world would advocate the free movement of labour. As a result, most people are trapped in their native lands, never likely to have a legal opportunity to see the world outside.
- B. Philippe Legrain, a liberal economist who once worked for *The Economist*, has already written a book stoutly defending globalisation*. Now he takes on an even more emotive subject. There is not a shadow of doubt about his own views: he wants open borders. He believes that they will, on balance, enrich both sending and receiving countries; he thinks diversity generally makes life more interesting; and he detests bureaucratic restrictions on human freedoms. “Immigrants are not an invading army,” he points out. “They come in search of a better life. They are no different to someone who moves from Manchester to London, or Oklahoma to California, because that is where the jobs are, except that a border lies in the way.”
- C. Mr Legrain has assembled powerful evidence to undermine the economic arguments against immigration. In the case of skilled migrants, that is relatively easy, but the migrants who arrive in the back of lorries and huddled in small

STUDENT SELF-MONITORING

- (1) *Waves of Fear?* Wave indicates, in my mind, something that might come ‘crashing in.’
- (2) *U.K. Edition?* Spelling, vocabulary, punctuation differences.
- (3) *January 11, 2007.* Current ‘hot’ topic.
- (4) No *sane* politician? Are there any sane politicians?
- (5) *trapped.* Sounds like animals.
- (6) *labour.* British spelling.
- (7) Philippe Legrain. Do I agree with his viewpoint?
- (8) *There is not a shadow of doubt about his own views...* Mr. Legrain has a very strong opinion regarding immigration.
- (9) *Diversity generally makes life more interesting.* I agree with this viewpoint.
- (10) *...he detests bureaucratic restrictions on human freedoms.* Me, too.

boats are unskilled. For them, there are hardly any legal routes across borders. Yet, argues Mr Legrain, they too bring economic benefits and do "little or no harm" to the wages or employment prospects of native workers.

(11) *Mr. Legrain has assembled powerful evidence...* I am curious to hear what his arguments are for unskilled labor.