

THE SELECTION OF WRITTEN TEXT
FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

notes

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Simplicity is difficult. (Alan Davies, 1984)

“Simplified versions always have a source script which has been changed, whereas simple accounts have a source but not script.”
(Widdowson, 1978)

“If the primary function of language is to help communicate meaning, then we could argue that language is only non-authentic when it is intended for a radically different function, i.e., when it is used by language teachers to illustrate linguistic features.”
(Davies, 1984)

This article focuses on how understanding text adaptation leads to more appropriate text selection for English learners. Understanding what makes a text comprehensible is a necessary part of deciding which texts to choose for second language learners. More specifically, this article looks at three key points: (1) What makes text comprehensible for English language learners? (2) How can these principles inform text selection for English learners? (3) How can required essential texts be made more accessible to English learners?

What Makes Text Comprehensible for English Learners?

All text presents English learners with issues related to the characteristics of text as input; disciplinary discourse adds another layer of complexity for English learners. The qualities of both make text more or less comprehensible and are examined below.

Input Characteristics

Although there is wide agreement about the importance of input in second language acquisition, there is disagreement about the characteristics this input needs to have. In his influential *Input Hypothesis* (1985), Krashen identifies



input that promotes successful learning of English as “comprehensible input,” or input that is linguistically one step beyond the learner’s current stage of development. Krashen also refers to such input as “caretaker speech,” a simplified version of language that follows the patterns parents and teachers use when talking to young children.

Examining Krashen’s theory, White (1987) argues that “caretaker speech” may lead to a situation of input deprivation, where instead of rich input that would model good language use, students receive inadequate, impoverished, and artificially simplified input. Even if we disregard this important concern, another limitation of Krashen’s model is its application in classes with English learners who have not all reached the same level of proficiency in English. Only if all learners are at the same level can the teacher provide input one level beyond the competence of all. The reality in most American secondary classrooms is that students possess varying levels of communicative competence in English.

In another consideration of what makes text comprehensible, Chaudron (1983) contrasts simplification in the *linguistic sense* (shortening of sentences, artificial simplification of syntactic structures, deletion or regularization of irregular forms, etc.) with simplification in the *cognitive sense* (building cognitively more explicit language through redundancy and other clarifying modifications). Cognitive simplification leads to texts that are easier to comprehend, while linguistic simplification often leads to the opposite. Text that is simplified in the cognitive sense contains characteristics of real, rich discourse rather than the stilted, characterless qualities of much of the text that has been linguistically simplified for English learners.

Widdowson (1979) established what is now a classical distinction between *simplified texts* and *simple accounts*. Simplified texts are texts that have been altered according to invariant, language-directed rules, such as “Replace polysyllabic words with monosyllabic words” or “Decompose complex sentences into separate simple sentences.”

In the following example from Echevarria & Goldenberg (1999) both the text and the task are simplified, but not necessarily made more comprehensible:

Original text/task:

Describe two situations in which the medieval knight wore his armor, and tell how the armor he wore was specifically suited to that situation.



Simplified text/task:

Medieval knights wore different armor for different situations. For parades knights wore _____. This was good because _____. For tournaments, knights wore _____. This was good because _____.

Simplification may actually be harmful to English learners by reducing (or annihilating) important qualities of natural speech to such an extent that successful comprehension is hindered. Simplification can also deny learners access to good language models – models that have positive generative power.

Widdowson’s simple accounts, on the other hand, attempt to make a text more comprehensible by clarifying referential and prepositional meanings and by adding redundancy and elaboration. Simple accounts take into consideration intended readers, their knowledge, and interests, defining what is simple or accessible relative to the needs of the audience – even though this may require a longer text or even, on occasion (for example, in the literary treatment of “The Knight’s Tale” in this module), one with more complex grammatical structure and fewer common words.

According to Long (1996) *input elaboration* implies adding redundancy to discourse through the use of repetition, paraphrases, and appositionals.¹ In his classification, *simplification* requires exclusively linguistic adjustments characterized by syntactically less complex utterances or sentences, a narrower range of verb tenses, fewer modifiers, and, frequently, some loss of semantic context. Long illustrates the differences as follows:

Original text:

Because he had to work at night to support his family, Paco often fell asleep in class.

Simplified text:

Paco had to make money for his family. Paco worked at night. He often went to sleep in class.

Elaborated text:

Paco had to work at night to earn money to support his family, so he often fell asleep in class next day during his teacher’s lesson.

¹ Non-subordinated phrases that are added to a noun or phrase to expand on its meaning, e.g., Mary, my husband’s assistant, is very capable.



A number of studies challenge the contention that word and sentence length are valid indicators of text difficulty. For example, Blau (1982) compared students' comprehension of the three types of passages illustrated above: original, simplified, and elaborated. She reports that the comprehension tasks that yielded the highest scores for non-native speakers were the elaborated ones. Parker and Chaudron (1987) also report that simplifications of syntax and vocabulary generally fail to have a significant positive effect on comprehension, whereas elaboration seems to improve comprehension. More recently, Oh (2001) found that in comparison with simplifications, simple accounts, or elaborations, produce higher rates of comprehension by readers reading in English as a second language.

As for word length, it is not as big a problem as teachers may think (Nation, 2002). Most long English words are derived from Greek and Latin, so for students whose mother tongue is a Romance language, these words are *cognates* – they look alike in both languages and therefore can be easily recognized during reading (although not necessarily in oral speech). For a Spanish speaking student, for example, *extraordinary* and *extraordinario*, *structural* and *estructural*, and *audible* and *audible* can easily be understood.

Disciplinary Discourse

Other important factors that make a text difficult for English learners are related to the specific characteristics of the disciplinary discourse, and of the realization of this discourse across different languages and dialects. In social studies, for example, texts in American English and in another language may refer to the same incident, but they may be constructed using very different patterns and perspectives (Kaplan, 1988; Kaplan & Grabe, 1983). Learners have expectations about how particular texts are organized, and these expectations may promote or hinder their reading comprehension. Consequently, students need to be explicitly socialized into the discourse and practices of the discipline in English.

In the case of American history, the textbooks themselves present a discipline-specific hazard. For example, analysis of American history textbooks shows that they often lack the coherence needed to enable even American English-speaking students to draw connections between events and ideas (McKeon & Beck, 1994). These texts also assume an unrealistic variety and depth of background knowledge from students, compounding comprehension



problems for English learners, whose limited exposure to and knowledge of American history further constrains their understanding.

Whatever the content area, English learners must be explicitly taught the discourse practices and common referents of the discipline. For example, in American history, this might include period rhetoric and referents such as the Constitution; in science it might include the ways that conclusions are stated; and in literature, it might include the routine phrases that indicate a fairy tale is in process.

What Guidelines Apply in Choosing Texts for English Learners?

The range of details to consider when selecting texts for English learners can be grouped into content and organizational considerations, linguistic factors, and typographical details. Each of these plays a role in making text more accessible to English learners.

Assessing the Use of Essential vs. Peripheral Content

Choosing text for English learners begins with discriminating between texts that provide essential and central concepts and information and those that provide an abundance of secondary information, which may prove distracting for second language learners. English learners not familiar with academic discourse structures are often distracted by ancillary information; for these students, it is especially true that “Less is more.”

Assessing Text Organization

The most powerful way to indicate content relationships is through subtitles and other headings that signal the conceptual organization of the text and that organize content into manageable and recognizable “chunks.” Subtitles and headings should be engaging and accessible to English learners; for these students, the headings should be as descriptive as possible. It is particularly useful to see whether the texts under consideration use framing questions as headings. Framing questions not only focus students’ attention on the essential content but also model a strategy used by successful readers.

Our adaptation of “The Clerk’s Tale” from the Canterbury Tales is an example of a text that uses headings that chunk the content, as well as framing questions. In the original version, the story proceeds without interruptions. As shown



below, in the adaptation the text has been broken into ten segments, determined by moves in the narrative. Each segment label is likewise determined by action episodes. Immediately below the segment label, a question for students has been added, intended to trigger the reader’s anticipatory abilities and interest.

Introducing Walter, the feudal lord of Saluzzo

What indications do we have that Walter is a powerful man?

Walter’s subjects tell him about their worries

Why are Walter’s subjects worried?

The future wife of the Marquis

Whom will Walter choose for his bride?

The wedding day

How did Walter prepare for the wedding day?

The surprised father of the bride

Why is Janicola surprised by the Marquis’s choice?

The marquis tests Griselda

Why does Walter want to test Griselda?

Patient Griselda’s second test

How does Walter test his wife one more time?

The marquis fakes a divorce

What kind of test does Walter put patient Griselda through this time?

The fake wedding (to his own daughter!)

Why did Walter send for his daughter?

The marquis tells patient Griselda the truth

How do the tests of Griselda’s patience end?

These text dividers help students to make sense of a complex text. They are guided to come to terms with component pieces, and to build from partial understanding to the whole. Without these text markers, students would miss the trees *and* the forest. Texts that are considerate of the needs of second language learners use similar text markers – another consideration when selecting text.



Assessing for Redundancy, Abundancy, and Elaboration

As noted above, English learners benefit from contextual redundancy and elaboration. A useful maxim is “Amplify, don’t simplify. (Walqui, 1991). English learners need as many clues as possible to derive maximum comprehension of a given piece of text. When selecting text for English learners, teachers should examine sections of the item under consideration to determine if the writers “amplify” text not only at the word, clause, or sentence level but also at the paragraph level. The paragraphs ought to be made up of sentences that provide multiple attachment points to each other and to the vocabulary and phrases that they contain.

In an article that introduces English learners to the pilgrimages of the Middle Ages and to *The Canterbury Tales*, for example, it is important to convey to students the concept of pilgrimages. In the excerpt below, redundancy, abundancy, and elaboration are all at work. First, the text is accompanied by an illustration of a group of medieval pilgrims on horseback. Other devices have been built into the text itself:

In the same way in which people today go on organized tours, during the middle ages, people in Europe went on pilgrimages. They did not go on pilgrimages for vacation purposes, though, they went for religious reasons.

While one may argue that pilgrimages and tourist tours are not the same thing, tours are the closest referent to students’ experiences, so the comparison allows learners to use the knowledge they have to illuminate new concepts about the medieval practice. The difference between vacation tours and pilgrimages is then elaborated in terms of the differing purposes of the two.

As the introductory text continues below, the concept of organized groups is recycled, and the religious aspects of pilgrimages are named and elaborated:

Gathered in groups, they traveled to places that were considered particularly sacred. They went on pilgrimages for diverse reasons, but all of them having to do with their relationship to God and the church: to have their sins forgiven, to pray to receive a special favor or miracle from God, to give thanks to God for favors they may have received, etc.

In the example above, the presentation for English learners is ample, not streamlined. When examining text for possible selection, teachers should sample



sections to see if the text uses sentences that have the authenticity of naturally produced language. Textbook publishers today often provide writing that is terse, comprising seemingly simple sentences made up of “easy” and commonly used vocabulary. The resulting sterile paragraphs are not only more difficult for students to understand but also lack models of authentic language use. It is true, however, that complex and compound sentences can tax an English learner’s memory; consequently, when selecting text, teachers should also sample several sections to see whether the writing avoids sentences containing embedded clauses with divergent yet related information. The text should also eliminate jargon and limit – not eliminate – the use of technical terms, which can cause difficulties for most readers, but especially for English learners.

Assessing Vocabulary Used

It is often assumed that text chosen for English learners substitutes more accessible terms for difficult terms. Obviously the actual words used in a text are an important consideration, especially in fields such as science, where text often contains many technical terms. One feature of suitable text for English learners will be its adherence to the “Amplify, don’t simplify” maxim. Rather than using a restricted set of words that are considered accessible to students, the goal ought to be to use as many familiar words as possible, building redundancy in the process. It is highly unlikely for every student to understand a restricted vocabulary equally. For English learners who are either new to a classroom or who, for whatever reason, are unable to learn the vocabulary required to understand a given text, reading becomes frustrating guesswork. The student’s task becomes attainable if, instead of a restricted vocabulary, the text chosen includes abundant synonyms and cognates that present a concept from various perspectives and offer diverse meaning facets for the same concept. A text with semantic redundancy offers English learners multiple opportunities to construct meaning and lowers the comprehension stakes for each word.

Furthermore, some terms with many syllables, which may appear by their length to be difficult, can be quite accessible. English terms that are cognates of Greek and Latin will look familiar to speakers of any of the Romance languages. For instance, native Spanish speakers will find that multisyllabic English words such as hypochondriac, structural, contradiction, and resonance have similar forms (and meanings) in English and Spanish. Recognizing these familiar forms is a boon, not a barrier, when reading in a new language.



Assessing Use of Text Enhancement Techniques

Another consideration when selecting appropriate text for English learners is layout of the text and additional typographical and contextual clues that are familiar to textbook publishers. There is consensus in the field of second language learning and teaching that a *focus on form*, i.e. helping students notice target forms in the input, is important to develop proficiency with these forms. Doughty and Williams (1998) point out that since linguistic forms present in the input might not be noticed due to their lack of saliency for the learners, other means may be required to induce noticing. *Text enhancement*, such as modifications achieved by bolding, increasing the type size, adding color, underlining, italicizing particular words or segments, etc., can draw the English learner’s attention to where it might not otherwise focus.

Additionally, text should provide students with clues and supports to decode key vocabulary. These techniques include highlighting typographically those key words that are also collected in a glossary or interspersing definitions and examples of important concepts and terms throughout the text.

Assessing Use of Graphics

It is true that “a picture is worth a thousand words,” especially for English learners. Thus, the choice, placement, and labeling of relevant graphics in text must be assessed for its usefulness to English learners. Ambiguous pictures or pictures with confusing labeling or irrelevant explanation can often lead English learners down the wrong path and, in an instant, compromise any other efforts to enhance the comprehensibility of a text.

Done well, text enhancements make text more accessible to English learners, but they are particularly powerful when teachers teach students, explicitly, to recognize their form and function and to apply appropriate reading strategies to derive the greatest meaning possible from them.

What Are the Steps in Selecting Text for English Learners?

In summary, when evaluating whether or not particular text is appropriate for English learners, consider the following:

1. Do appropriate scaffolds allow the students to derive meaning from the text?



2. Does the text under consideration focus on essential components of the subject matter, or is there much tangential material, which might prove distracting to English learners?
3. How useful are the subtitles and other markers for English learners? Are they descriptive? Do they provide framing questions?
4. Is the text overloaded with complex paragraphs and sentences or is linguistic complexity avoided except as necessary? Are there appropriate referents and connections to help English learners access the material? Does the language appear natural?
5. Is the use of technical language and material limited to what is essential, with appropriate redundancy and elaboration built in?
6. Does the text offer typographical enhancements, which would aid English learners in their comprehension of the text?

What If the Text Is Difficult but Essential?

When particular text is deemed essential to the curriculum, but the text as written provides obstacles for English learners, what options are available?

Of course, adapting the text is one possibility, but as mentioned previously, this option requires writing expertise and time. Offering a variety of scaffolding devices in these situations may provide students a suitable way to access otherwise incomprehensible text. What are some of these possible scaffolds?

1. Provide several different versions of the material that the students are studying, including material in the students' first languages. This will allow students to draw from their own fund of knowledge and apply those schemas to the more difficult text.
2. Meet with colleagues in the same discipline to adapt the most crucial elements of a text. For example, decide together which are the key components of the text, photocopy these, cut them into the pre-decided chunks, and add headings and framing questions between the chunks as you reassemble (paste) them onto new pages. This technique helps students read the text in manageable chunks and practice skills that good readers have appropriated.
3. Offer students the opportunity to adapt the texts. Rather than assigning the entire chapter to a student, assign different portions of the chapter



to different students or groups of students who will rework the material to make it more accessible to English learners. Students can then use this material as an aid to reading the original text. This may diminish the amount of material covered, but it will help to insure that what is covered is understood.

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