

SELECTING IDEAL MATERIALS FOR READING SKILL: BOOKS REVIEW

Indah Wahyuningsih

Abstrak. Artikel ini ditulis untuk meninjau ulang dan menilai tiga materi pengajaran bahasa, yaitu tiga buku 'Reading' yang diterbitkan 1 hingga 3 dekade lalu. Review terhadap materi-materi 'Reading' ini menggunakan kerangka kerja dan kriteria yang diajukan oleh Tomlinson (2003), Saraceni (2003), dan Masuhara (2003). Materi Reading ini adalah materi untuk level pre-intermediate. Untuk melihat kualitas buku-buku ini dalam memenuhi tujuan pedagogi, satu unit digunakan sebagai contoh dan dianalisa agar pengajar dapat menilai dan menyeleksi apakah buku-buku ini mampu memenuhi syarat dan prinsip buku bahan ajar ideal bagi siswa pembelajar bahasa kedua, terutama materi otentik 'Reading,' dan apakah masih layak digunakan dalam proses belajar mengajar siswa aktif saat ini. Evaluasi yang diterapkan didasarkan pada kerangka kerja pengembangan materi dan universal criteria serta content specific criteria dari materi-materi dimaksud.

Kata-kata kunci: pedagogic purpose, universal criteria, content specific criteria, authentic material, student centred learning model.

The purpose of reviewing the 3 teaching materials on reading skill in this article is to answer this question: What ideal reading material should be chosen for teaching second language (L2) students? This question arises when it is found that most reading materials have been driven away from the pedagogic purpose and the students/learners' need. They do not stimulate and elicit the students' potency cognitively and affectively. It is based on fact and experience of teaching that colourful and luxurious presentation of reading course books are mostly only for the sake of sales benefit. Using ideal frameworks and criteria for material development on reading materials for L2 learners hopefully will help teachers and learners find ideal materials for reading skill.

The three sets of reading course books reviewed are 1. *Shades of Meaning*, published in 1983 (Material 1); 2. *Reading 1*, published in 1991 (Material 2); and 3. *Select Readings*, published in 2002 (Material 3). All these three materials are for pre-intermediate level learners. The different years of publication are selected to see the development of teaching materials for reading skill, especially for the same level in 3 decades. The presentation, the objective, the topic, the activity, the authenticity and the student centred learning model of the 3 sets reading materials from the 3 course books

are reviewed to measure the ideal reading materials for L2 students of pre-intermediate level. The books are:

1. *Shades of Meaning* (Reading Book for Pre-Intermediate)

Mark Ellis and Printha Ellis

Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd 1983 78 pp

ISBN 0-17-555419-6

2. *Reading 1* (Reading Book for Pre-Intermediate)

Simon Greenall and Diana Pye

Cambridge University Press 1991 88 pp

ISBN 0 521 34671 1

3. *Select Reading* (Reading Book for Pre-Intermediate)

Linda Lee and Erik Gundersen

Oxford University Press 2002 178 pp

ISBN 0-19-437700-8

The Description of the 3 Selected Books

The three books in general give a view on common reading materials for L2 learners. They try to present authentic reading materials. All are consistent with the same technique of presenting the reading materials through the pre-reading, whilst reading, and post-reading, but each has different approaches to apply. The three books are claimed themselves as student centred books which are promising to ideal reading materials. Vocabulary building through the reading texts and practices in these books are recognized as an effort to develop language acquisition through semantics and structural areas. All the books focus on the main objective of reading comprehension. Vocabulary building, text structures, and reading skills are employed in different ways.

General Description of Material 1

This book consists of 10 units. Each unit is divided into three sections: pre-reading, whilst reading, and post-reading. The topics of the units are various and they are mostly authentic materials. The illustrations within the book are not colourful, but some represent their function of the visual aids. Reading text and practice are combined in relation to the vocabulary building, sentence structure and text structure understanding, and reading skill practice. The passage is divided into 2 parts. Its main

objective is to build up the skill, to find variety of language, and to lead to deeper comprehension. Each unit has the same structure and organization. The language and vocabulary applied in the book match the pre intermediate level. It is published in 1983.

General Description of Material 2

Reading 1 is a communicative reading book for pre-intermediate level. It is designed in only 20 units teaching activities, and written in 88 pages. This book is set for learners with enough vocabularies for their level. The language focus in the book is mapped to elicit the structure areas, vocabulary areas, and reading strategies. The reading strategies offered are presented consistently in every unit of the book. Extracting main idea, predicting, reading for specific information, and understanding text organization are applied in every unit of the book. It explicitly states the purpose and the scope of the lesson. This reading book is organised into pre-reading, whilst reading, and post reading. The texts are presented in various genres. The reading texts are mostly authentic reading and it may further challenge the students to read. The pictures and illustrations are not colourful, but most of them convey the function of the visual aids. Topics of the units are various and interesting.

General Description of Material 3

In general, *Select Readings* tries to offer more complete factors to acquire L2 through reading content, skills, vocabulary, and language focus. Written in 14 chapters, it looks ideal for pre intermediate level students. Topics among units are not related, but each topic of the unit is presented in the same style of organization. The vocabulary list after the reading text is expected to help the students to easily understand the text. The pre-reading gives students background knowledge before they start the whilst reading. The text is completed with numbering at the left hand. The language focus and skill focus are explicitly stated before each chapter starts. Topics of the units are various, and they give more opportunity to the learners for improving their vocabularies. The selected readings are mostly less authentic reading. The culture and language notes on page 151-163 try to compensate the weakness of this book.

The Criteria and Frameworks Applied for Reviewing the 3 Books

In order to have an ideal material of teaching L2, a material should be revised and adapted in an appropriate way. This aim can be gained through a review and evaluation based on rigorous, systematic, and principled procedures. Judgements about

how effective a material used in the teaching process and the effects of this material to the people who used it is very important. That is why there must be criteria and frameworks to apply for material evaluation.

Tomlinson (2003, p.30) categorizes the universal criteria and content-specific criteria for material evaluation. The universal criteria is including ideal learning principles, cultural perspective, topic content, teaching points, texts, activities, methodology, instructions, and design. The content-specific criteria is relevant to reading skills book which is concerning with genre. These criteria will be applied for this books evaluation. This criteria is based on Tomlinson (2003, pp. 119- 121) frameworks which cover text collection, text selection, text experience, readiness activities, experiential activities, intake response activities, development activities, and input response activities.

More criteria developed by Saraceni (2003, pp.75-77) and Masuhara (2003, pp. 351-354) are also considered. Saraceni tries to list the key features when evaluating and adapting courses. They should concern with learner centred material, material with flexibility and choice, material which is open ended, material which is relevant, universal, and authentic. Moreover, Masuhara emphasizes the 4 principles on ideal reading materials. They are the engaging affect of reading materials, listening to a text before reading which encourages learners to focus on meaning, material which is achieving multidimensional mental representation in the reader's mind, and materials that help learners experience the text first before they draw their attention to its language.

The Evaluation on the 3 Reading Materials from the Selected Books

In analysing and evaluating the books, 3 units are taken as examples of reading materials from the 3 selected books. The frameworks and criteria abovementioned will be applied to evaluate the following 3 reading materials.

Unit 1 of Material 1

The objective of this unit is not explained explicitly. Instruction is not clear as well. Learners will never realize that they are elicited to the strategy of scanning and referencing (see p.6 for example). The organization of the material is daunting. The pre-reading looks like a post-reading (see: Read and Search, Read and Think, and

Vocabulary, p.6). The background knowledge that should be applied in the pre- reading section is not seen. Learners are forced to go directly to the reading text (whilst-reading). This may cause the learners get confuse, even though the writer probably want to make this book student centred learning model.

Although the book is not appealing for it is presented in black and white, the illustration functions its visual aids. The topic is interesting enough for the learners to get involved in the discussion for it invites the learners' opinions and views. This may not be provoking, but it motivates the learners to learn more about Braille which is considered as unique letters used by the blind. It may invite reaction and aesthetic experience (see: Braille alphabet, p. 8 for example).

The vocabulary gloss helps the students to understand the reading text, however this section does not elicit the students creativity. The students are left themselves memorize the vocabularies rather than understand the meaning through the context (see p.9 for example). In the vocabulary practice, the preposition and the phrasal verbs practice are linked to the reading passage, but this is too limited practice. How could the students be invited to more understanding on the use of preposition and phrasal verbs with this limited practice? (see: vocabulary practice, p.9). The comprehension questions presented in a true or false option look so simple, but it is recognised as motivating the readers' comprehension about the text (see p.10, for example: a) Louis Braille was a leather worker).

The text is authentic for it aims to introduce the Braille to the reader (see pp.6-8), but the practice is non-authentic as it is using filling gaps, answering questions, and stating true or false (see: practice, p.9-11). However, this draw the learners' attention to the language features of the input through language awareness activities based on text from the authentic material in this topic. The other good point for this book is that the open ended questions in section 2 of Text Structure Exercise (see: p. 11) for example meets the ideal text evaluation. However, the sentence structure and text structure practice is too much to be a practice on grammar rather than a practice on understanding the reading itself. In general, this unit does not offer materials that help learners experience the text first before they draw their attention to its language.

Unit 3 of Material 2

The map of the book tells the objective of the unit obviously. The most interesting thing is that the writer tries to introduce song lyrics as one of text genres for learning L2 purpose and as reading material for this unit (see text: "Tom's Diner,"p.8). Selecting the song entitled 'Tom's diner' supports the topic of restaurant in an interesting and fun way. The pictures and illustration function as visual aids to the reading material (see pictures: p.7 as example). It helps the students to understand the expressions linked to the reading text. It develops the students' background knowledge about restaurant as well. Instructions are clear and it evokes communicative approach to start a reading class.

In the activity, the learners are learning the present continuous tense while learning vocabulary and comprehending the text (see section 3 line one, p.8 for example: I am sitting). This is an effective way of teaching reading communicatively. In this section the learners are given time to analyse the text after an enjoyable experience of it. They are also established to an effective and cognitive connection to the L2 learning process to achieve comprehension. This activity is promising a creative learning process (see pp.8-9: activities 3-8).

The last section of post-reading (section 8) is encouraging the learners to give their opinion about the song. It lets the students to be actively involved in the inspiring situation. This section is extending the learners view and experience towards the authentic task. This unit is a representative of a communicative reading book. To sum up, the post-reading is designed to improve the words and expressions learnt from the text. This is presented briefly but challenging. This is related to not only vocabulary building applied in the reading text, but also to the structural areas, and reading strategies. This book is interesting. The writer tries to build the learners' knowledge to attribute the most appropriate meaning in relation to their context and co text.

Chapter 7 of Material 3

Select Readings uses chapter rather than unit which both mean the same. The objective of the chapter is stated explicitly. This explicit objective gives a brief view on what the learners are going to study in this lesson and helps the learners to focus

themselves on the scope of discussion. Instructions within the chapter are clear and understandable.

The topic of this chapter which is a ghost story to some people who believe it is interesting and inciting, but to some other people who do not believe it is a non sense. However, this topic is provoking. It can raise different opinion and points of view among the learners. This is challenging and inviting students' involvement in one side, but this could be demotivating for those who are not interested in the story about ghost on the other side.

The pre-reading gives the learners two activities concerning with scanning rather than gives the learners background knowledge about the reading text as the writers claim so (see A & B: p.66). It does invite the students idea about the story with the statement: "I think this story is about: _____", (see A: p.66) but it needs teacher's role to encourage them with more ideas about ghost stories before they start with the text. This book really needs teachers who can bring the class communicatively and help learners to realize the effective process of studying. Otherwise, it can be boring.

In the reading process, the narrative story flows without any interesting activity to do (see: pp.67-68). However, the list of vocabulary helps the student to understand the story easily and the vocabulary within the text matches the pre-intermediate level. The text is claimed as an authentic material, but this narrative one reduces the authenticity (see: pp.67-68). The whilst reading in general only meets a need to concentrate on reading rather than actively involving the learners to understand the text.

The only ideal thing in this material is that some practices are open ended (see C: p.69, discussion & writing: p.73) and there is cultural theme to raise as well (Ghost to different countries and cultures is believed in different way). The practices within the post reading offers a lot of practice on understanding the text, reading skill, vocabulary building, language focus, discussion and writing. Some activities in this section help the preceding section to be used in cognitive and analytical way, but for some sections students may consider them boring (see B, group work step 1: p74).

Conclusion

The three books have both positive values and negative values for some reasons. These books are trying to ensure the reader on what to achieve in teaching material,

specifically the reading skill books, but what is found are sometimes the opposite. They claimed themselves as a student centred learning books with authentic materials, but what they convey are more on practice and exercise which is sometimes boring to some extent.

Shades of Meaning is good at content, but it is expected to be more well planned on giving instructions and organization to avoid the learners of being confused by what to do with this reading material. *Reading 1* is more consistent in presenting and educating the learners with the real reading material. It comes close to an ideal reading material which is communicative and effective. Even though this book was written 20 years ago, this is recommended to use for it meets the student's need. *Select Readings* offers a more complete sections and practice on the reading comprehension, vocabulary, and text structure, but it provides less authentic materials and gives more guided practice rather than lets the students creatively communicating.

References

- Brumfit, C. (1984). *Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Cook, V. (1993). *Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition*. Macmillan Press.
- Ellis, P. and Printha Ellis. (1983). *Shades of Meaning*.: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: CUP.
- Greenall, S. and Diana Pye. (1991). *Reading 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. Oxford: University Press.
- Lee, L. and Erik Gundersen. (2002). *Select Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Masuhara, H. (2003). Materials for Developing Reading Skills. In Brian Tomlinson, *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*. London: Continuum. 340-363.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing Task for the Communicative Classroom (Language Teaching Library)*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Richard, J. and W.A. Renandya (ed.). (2002) *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. Cambridge: CUP.

Richards, J. and Rodgers, T. (2001). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: CUP.

Saraceni, C. (2003). Adapting Courses: A Critical View. In Brian Tomlinson, *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*. London: Continuum. 72-85.

Tomlinson, B. (1998). *Materials Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tomlinson, B. (2003). *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*. London: Continuum.

Tomlinson, B. (2008). *English Language Learning Materials: A Critical Review*. London: Continuum.