

Communicative reading, and language learning through reading

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Reading in real language use and language learning

Reading is one of the skills most children begin to develop at school, in their first language, learning the basic system of reading and writing in that language in kindergarten or early primary. After that, reading is a regular school activity, mostly with textbooks, and also a leisure activity for some children and teenagers (as shown by the success of books like the Harry Potter series).

After completing basic education, reading becomes just an occasional or marginal activity for some people (they only read notices, advertisements, bits of newspaper and magazine, and now bits on computer and smartphone screens), but it's a frequent and very important one for others. Many people have to do a lot of reading (especially office workers, professionals and academics), and some people like to do a lot (readers of novels, non-fiction books, etc.).

People who read little tend to have a smaller vocabulary and some difficulty reading long or complex texts, while those who read a lot tend to have larger vocabularies and the ability to handle such texts fairly easily. Reading, then, can assist greatly in first language development, as well as giving access to needed information and ideas or culture and enjoyment. It can do the same in the learning of English as a foreign language, even at beginner level by speakers of European languages that use Latin script, like Latin Americans.

Reading in learning English as a foreign language

Almost all learners of English as a foreign language come to the task already able to read in their first language, and many as very proficient readers. Even so, learning to read in English is a big challenge for native speakers of Russian (русский), Thai (ภาษาไทย), Japanese (日本語), and other languages. For native speakers of Portuguese and Spanish, however, it's a relatively small challenge: not only is the writing system largely the same, but, especially in more formal texts, there are many cognate words, and the grammar operates similarly to some extent. Reading for Latin American students of English can give increased exposure to English and permit the learning or consolidation of grammar and vocabulary from the very beginning, as well as developing reading skills.

Latin American students of English have an advantage in reading even over German students, especially with formal texts, which are what English-using professionals usually need to read most. Consider these three versions of the same United Nations text:

Darf kein Unterschied gemacht werden auf Grund der politischen, rechtlichen oder internationalen Stellung des Landes oder Gebiets, dem eine Person angehört, gleichgültig ob dieses unabhängig ist, unter Treuhandschaft steht, keine Selbstregierung besitzt oder sonst in seiner Souveränität eingeschränkt ist.

No distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

No se hará distinción alguna fundada en la condición política, jurídica o internacional del país o territorio de cuya jurisdicción dependa una persona, tanto si se trata de un país independiente, como de un territorio bajo administración fiduciaria, no autónomo o sometido a cualquier otra limitación de soberanía.

The Spanish version is much more similar to the English version than the German version is. That's generally the case, especially in formal texts. Lots of reading – but not the text above! – can be included even in beginner courses for older teenager and adult students in Latin America.

However, most courses in Latin America use international textbooks (or local textbooks modelled on them) which are designed to be sold around the world, including Germany, Thailand and Japan. Consequently, most beginner textbooks have very little reading in them. I checked five very well-known international beginners' textbooks for young adults sold in Latin America and found that the average number of reading texts/tasks was 1 per 5.4 pages, with 1 per 3.8 pages the highest and 1 per 7.7 pages the lowest. The average to lowest ratio may be fine for Thailand, Japan, etc., where the Latin script used for English has to be taught to beginners, or even for some European countries with languages that share little cognate vocabulary with English, but it isn't appropriate for young adults in Latin America.

Note that classifying material in those five textbooks as reading texts/tasks was not that easy because many that I accepted (and some I rejected) were designed largely to present or consolidate "the new language of the unit/lesson". I accepted those that could be considered texts that beginners in English might possibly want to read for themselves.

Communicative reading

That's really the minimal requirement for communicative reading: readers should at least vaguely want to read and understand something for themselves, even if just to practice their reading in English in a fairly agreeable way. A second requirement (which caused me some trouble with those five textbooks) is that texts should be fairly natural and not be artificially loaded with examples of "the new language of the unit", either to present it or to consolidate it. Given those two basic requirements, it's a matter of the more readers are genuinely interested in reading and understanding the text, the better. And, of course, readers should be able to understand the text. All that presents textbook writers and teachers with a great challenge, especially at beginner and elementary level: finding/adapting/creating texts that interest specific EFL students, that are accessible to those students (with a specific native language), and that are natural written discourse, not peculiar beginner English.

Meeting that challenge fully is virtually impossible for international general purpose textbooks, though some do quite well, for motivated students at least, with simple general interest texts. It requires more focused textbooks, like those for ESP (English for business, medicine, etc.), or complementation of the textbook by the educational institution or the teachers. On that point, after you've read this article, you might want to count and examine the reading in your textbooks (enough of it or too little, appropriate for your students' characteristics and actual or probable needs or not?) and think about the different or additional reading that could help your students more than the textbooks alone do. Sources of reading material are now wider than ever before, with the Internet in addition to traditional printed material, which in itself includes other EFL textbooks and graded readers.

If your students simply read a lot and do whatever they like with it in their heads, that's communicative reading, and very positive. However, you may want or need to give them tasks in order to ensure they do and benefit from reading. There are many types of reading tasks, some just to confirm comprehension, e.g. with multiple choice questions, some to develop sub-skills like skimming, scanning and noting logical connections. However, communicative reading is really about thinking about the text,

perhaps discussing it with others, and perhaps applying things in it in your life (your studies, work, etc.). The best types of task for communicative reading, then, are answering questions (including questions about the reader's reactions and opinions), discussing the text, and applying the text in other activities (as in Task-Based Learning). That can be difficult in beginners' courses, but even there, you can use simple questions about the text and about the students' reactions and opinions. As the course level rises, the possibilities for communicative reading tasks and related activities become ever greater.

More reading than is usual in beginners' courses for adults can be motivating. For example, many students enter higher education in Latin America (and elsewhere) with little or no English, and they go into a beginner or low elementary English course for the third or fourth time (after two or three "beginnings" at school). If the students do some bits of reading related to their higher education studies, it can make the course more relevant than the beginners' courses they had at school.

Objections to a lot of reading in beginners' courses, and solutions

Lots of reading in beginner and elementary level courses has been frowned upon in the past, and some methodologists and teachers continue to feel that way. Reasons given have included the supposed primacy of spoken language over written language and the effect of early reading on pronunciation. Speaking before writing may be a good, even necessary, principle for teaching young children, but it loses strength as we move to older children, teenagers and adults. In fact, for many older students of English, reading in English is as or more important than speaking it (like many of the students in higher education mentioned above).

The fear of beginner and elementary students falling into "spelling pronunciation" (e.g. students reading: *Lots of ray-adding in begin-air and elemen-tarry co-urses hass bay-en frow-ned...*) has some basis. But with English as the main classroom language, the risk should be much reduced, and more so if you can get your students to do some reading-and-listening outside class, and some reading aloud in class (combined with discussion of what was read). Lots of reading-and-listening material is now available, e.g. graded EFL readers with CDs and online material.

The benefits of lots of reading, possible even in beginners' courses for Latin American students, can be really great, and the risks are not great.

EFL reading – beginnings and happy endings

I've asserted that more reading than is usual, even for beginners (and perhaps especially for them), can help Latin American teenagers and adults learn the English language better, as well as developing their ability to read in English. Young children may get fewer benefits and have more problems (I'm no expert on that), but many older children certainly benefit from and enjoy reading. My Mexican (and only!) wife Emma was the librarian in a branch of the Anglo for some years, and she often said how impressed she was by the children. They were an example for the teenagers and adults, she said. Many would take out a children's reader every week, and a few would take out two or three. She used to ask them about the readers they were handing in, and their enthusiasm was infectious, even when they said something like: "Mm... it was OK. I liked the end. The children...". Yes, I know, "the ending" would be better than "the end", but who cares when Mexican children are reading in English and really enjoying it?