

Ill-designed Reading Activities: The Case of a Unit in Grade 11 English Textbook

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of the reading activities set in English textbooks in training learners to develop effective reading skills. To this end, the first unit of Grade 11 English Textbook was taken as an example. Attempts were made to examine the nature and effectiveness of the pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities set in the unit in helping learners develop different reading skills. The questions set in the unit with regard to reading activities were examined based on the current theories of teaching reading skills. Each question set in relation to the reading activities was analyzed in relation to its intended objective, its construction/design and its effectiveness in attaining the intended objective. Results of the study show that the reading activities in the unit are poorly designed; they do not train learners to developing effective reading skills. For example, the objectives of the reading activities are not properly stated; they do not indicate clearly the intended reading skill(s) to be developed, and there are mismatches between the intended reading skills and the nature of questions designed to practice the skills.

Introduction

The 1994 education policy underlined the need to change the *Derg* curriculum, and introduce new textbooks on a sequential basis to the primary level starting from Grades 1 and 5. Accordingly, regional states started preparing new textbooks, other than the English textbooks for Grades 1 and 5 in 1994 based on the centrally prepared syllabi, and modifying them to suit their specific situations. The responsibility of preparing textbooks for the primary level (Grades 1-8) was given to regional education bureaus. It was decided that they would complete preparing the textbooks for the primary level within four years (for Grades 1 and 5 in 1994/5, for Grades 2 and 6 in 1995/6, for Grades 3 and 7 in 1996/7, and for Grades 4 and 8 in 1997/8).

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However, the responsibility of preparing English textbooks for all levels was given to the English Panel, Institute of Curriculum and Educational Research (ICDR), Ministry of Education. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education prepared English textbooks for the primary level within four years, 1994/95 to 1997/8, and published English for Ethiopia series for the secondary level in 1996 under the guidance and technical assistance of experts from the British Council.

The English for Ethiopia series differs greatly from the English for New Ethiopia series both in content and approach. For example, in the English for Ethiopia series, language skills that were excluded from the previous textbooks (speaking and writing) have been given the maximum teaching emphasis. An approach that brings learners to the center of learning has been introduced in the English for Ethiopia series following the insights gained from the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). A circular from ICDR, Ministry of Education, to regional curriculum departments in September 1994 stated that all languages should be taught according to the principles and techniques of the CLT. These textbooks were revised by Kuraz International Publisher and Educational Works Consultant Enterprise and reprinted in 2006.

Theoretical Background

A lot of issues have been at the center of discussion in literature in relation to foreign language teaching and learning since the beginning of the 1970s. Since the 1970s, different versions of the communicative approach to language teaching have appeared in different parts of the world (see Candlin, 1976; Wilkins, 1976; Brumfit and Johnson, 1979; Widdowson, 1979; and others in Britain, the work of Krashen and Terrel, 1983 in America and the work of Prabhu, 1987 in India). Following the appearance of the communicative language teaching on the stage, issues such as learner related factors (learner autonomy, learning styles, learner strategy, affective factors, etc.), and factors related to teachers (teacher belief systems, their roles in the classrooms, their training, etc.), types of syllabuses, and nature

of language learning tasks have dominated literature on foreign language teaching.

The paradigm shift in language teaching that started at the beginning of the 1970s has also significantly changed the nature of language textbooks. Richards (1998, p.125) writes, "Contemporary language textbooks are visually appealing with full-color art and sophisticated magazine-like design, printed on high-quality paper and supported by an assortment of supplementary resources, such as workbooks, cassettes, CDs, CD-ROMs, and videos." Though Richards' words refer to the commercial textbooks produced in the context of the developed world, attempts have been made to use the same nature of tasks (communicative tasks that encourage learners to use the target language) in the language textbooks all over the world (Karavas-Doukas, 1996).

The communicative era also marked the beginning of discussions related to the role of textbooks in second language learning. This began with Allright's (1981) article in which he identified 'deficiency and different views' of textbooks and suggested that there should be a switch of emphasis from 'teaching' materials to 'learning' materials. Since then, there have been plenty of arguments both 'for' and 'against' textbooks in literature. Those who argue in favor of the textbook say that textbooks standardize instruction, maintain quality, provide variety of learning resources, save teachers time, provide efficient language model, help inexperienced teachers, and provide resources for self-study outside classroom (Harmer, 1991; Hutchinson and Torres, 1994; Crawford, 1995). However, those who argue against the use of textbooks say that textbooks deskill teachers, may not reflect learners' needs, may contain inauthentic language/or materials, may distort content, may be expensive, are often culturally inappropriate, are not compatible with a learner-centered philosophy of teaching, are causes for learners' errors, and are not needed by teachers who can create their own materials (Allwright, 1981; Ariew, 1982; Shannon, 1987; Apple and Jungck, 1990; Swan, 1992).

Statement of the Problem

As indicated above, issues related to the role of textbooks in learning foreign languages is at the center of discussion starting from the beginning of the 1980s. Though there are strong arguments against the use of textbooks in acquiring second language skills, it seems that there is a consensus among many that language textbooks play important roles in helping learners develop skills of the target language, and in helping inexperienced teachers. It is widely believed that it is through the use of different tasks/activities set in the textbooks, particularly in developing nations where there are no other resources and where the environment is not conducive to practice a target language, that learners get the opportunity to practice the use of the target language.

Therefore, the focus has been on selecting/designing different language learning tasks/activities based on research findings and the prevailing language teaching/learning theories and approaches. Tasks/activities that bring learners to the center of learning have been recommended in language textbooks in Ethiopia following the education policy introduced in 1994. Accordingly, the MoE prepared and published new textbooks, English for Ethiopia series, in 1996, which were revised and published again in 2006, for secondary and preparatory classes.

Since the publication of the textbooks, a lot of research work, particularly MA theses and a few PhD dissertations, have been conducted focusing on the extent to which the different techniques suggested in the textbooks have been implemented. Many findings agree that though the textbooks have been changed, the practice of the English language teaching has not changed.

As stated above, studies have been conducted to see the implementation of the techniques suggested in the currently in use textbooks but no attempt has been made to look at the extent to which efforts have been made to select/design appropriate tasks/activities that are based on the current

theories of language teaching and learning to help learners develop the intended English language skills. Thus, questions that remained unanswered include: 'How do the tasks/activities used in the currently in use English textbooks differ from those used in the previous English textbooks?' 'Are the tasks/activities in the currently in use English textbooks based on the theories and practices of the CLT as it has been claimed?' 'Are tasks/activities used in the new textbooks properly selected/designed so that they train learners in developing the English language skills?'

There are a lot of questions that need answers regarding the nature and quality of tasks/activities used in the currently in use English textbooks. Therefore, this study tries to assess the nature of reading tasks/activities used in Grade 11 English Student Textbook (revised in 2006) focusing on the first unit called '*People and Customs*'.

Objective of the Study

The aim of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of the reading activities set in English textbooks in training learners to develop effective reading skills. In particular, the study tries to:

- assess the nature of pre-reading questions set in training learners to develop the skill of making predictions;
- evaluate the nature of comprehension questions set to see the what extent to which help learners develop different reading skills; and
- examine the nature of post-reading activities set to help learners go beyond the reading texts to relate what they read to their own experiences.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are hoped to give valuable information about the nature of reading activities used in the currently in use textbooks. Therefore, syllabus designers and textbook writers will be the main beneficiaries of the

findings. Learners may also ultimately benefit because syllabus designers and textbook writers can use the findings of the study and to improve the quality of the reading activities.

Method

The method used in this study was analyzing the questions set in relation to the reading activities in the unit focusing on the effectiveness of the questions in training learners to develop the intended reading skills. Current theories and practices of teaching reading skills guided the analysis of the activities. The main focus of the analysis was not to see if the activities accommodated various questions types to help students develop reading skills but it had the objective to see if the reading related activities were effective enough to help learners develop the desired reading skills.

Therefore, each question set in connection with the reading activities was analyzed in relation to its intended objective, design and effectiveness. In addition, instructions given to the reading activities were analyzed. An attempt has also been made to look at an overview of the unit because this would help readers to get the gist of the English language textbooks in use in schools.

Discussions

Overview of Unit One: People and Customs

People and Customs is the first unit of the textbook. The following claims are made about the objectives of the unit.

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss habits and customs;
- read the passage and answer comprehension questions;

- give and respond to instructions in English in the classroom;
- exchange personal details in English;
- interview different persons and then report back to your class; and
- write a description of a person's appearance.

If we look at the above objectives, it is not difficult to notice that there are basic problems in stating the objectives of this unit in terms of teaching and learning English in our context. For example, the first objective which reads "discuss habits and customs" is not stated in terms of the ultimate goal of learning English in schools. This objective gives emphasis to the information that the learners get knowledge from the reading text, rather than the English language skill they develop in talking about 'habits and customs'. In addition, talking about 'habits and customs' is very general to be an objective- it does not specifically state any specific aspect of habit or custom that students talk about.

Likewise, the second objective does not indicate purposes for students' answering the comprehension questions. It does not state the type of reading skills intended to be developed through practicing the comprehension questions. Similarly, all the rest of the objectives are not stated in terms of language skills to be developed through the designed activities in this unit.

Moreover, the objectives are not comprehensive enough to include all sections and exercises covered in the unit. For example, no objective is stated for the vocabulary and listening sections. Similarly, there are no objectives in relation to exercises on question tags, conducting interviews and the poem they read.

Reading Section

Unit one is divided into six sections: reading, vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening and writing covering the first twenty pages of the textbook. Under the reading section, there are three exercises designed for

different purposes: pre-reading, 'discussion on the passage' and 'questions on the passage' (stated as they appear in the textbook). Table 1 below presents details and areas of focus in each section.

Table 1: Coverage of the Reading Section in Unit One

Number of Pages	Nature of Exercises
1. Reading (five and half pages)	-Pre-reading questions -Exercise on guessing words from contexts (three questions) -Discussion of the passage (Exercise 2) -Questions of the passage (Exercise 3)

Exercise 1: Pre-reading Activity

Literature on reading skills underlines that pre-reading activities are designed to help learners to establish prior knowledge about the text they are to read so as to help them predict the content of the reading text they are going to read. This helps them to compare and contrast what they already know with new pieces of information in the text they read, which enables them to extract necessary information from what they read according to their purpose of reading. Therefore, the content of the pre-reading questions should be directly related to the content of the text they are supposed to read. It is also believed that pre-reading activities motivate students to read. Moreover, in pre-reading activities key vocabulary items are pre-taught.

There are four pre-reading questions set to achieve the above objectives. These are:

1. What are the differences and similarities between 'culture', 'custom' and 'habit'?
2. Can you mention some common cultures, customs and habits that people have in the world? Please tell your friends what they are.

3. Do you think that there are differences between rituals and customs? If you say yes, what are they? Discuss in groups and write a list of similarities and differences.
4. What is the difference between 'autobiography' and 'biography'?

These pre-reading questions have basic problems in relation to the nature of the pre-reading activities discussed in literature. The first three questions are very general questions. They are like questions set to test knowledge of a certain course on Sociology or Anthropology. In addition, these questions are not directly related to and reflect the content of the reading text (the text discusses problems the autobiographer faced due to cultural differences when he visited a traditional African family). The aim of the last question is also not clear. It seems that this question was set to pre-teach the word 'autobiography' and 'biography'. However, these words appeared nowhere in the reading text. It also seems that the question was set to make clear the conceptual differences between the two words, which in fact is irrelevant to the information in the reading text.

Moreover, there is a problem in relation to the given instructions. For just four questions, three instructions are given in different places. The first instruction which reads, "Discuss the following questions with your classmates and your teacher before you read the passage" is a general instruction given to all the pre-reading questions. In addition, there are instructions appended to questions 2 and 3 repeating the same thing stated in the above instruction.

Immediately next to the pre-reading activity, there are four items set on vocabulary contextual guess work that are stated as follows.

Vocabulary in Context

1. We had a long way to go to Goode in the Somalia Region, so we woke at dawn and **set off** very early. The meaning of 'set off' is _____.
2. As he had eaten too much quickly he **belched** loudly. The word 'belched' means _____.
3. At our age we should know what good manners are. Please let us mind our manners wherever we are. The phrase 'mind our manners' means _____.

As one can see, it is not clear why these three questions are there between the pre-reading activity and the reading text. First of all, there is no instruction given in relation to these questions. Second, it is very difficult to categorize these questions under the pre-reading activity because such questions never appear in pre-reading activities. Third, though the target word and phrases appear in the passage the sentences in which they are used are not found in the reading text. There is also irregularity in writing the target words. In the first two sentences, the phrase 'set off' and the word 'belched' are in bolds while the target phrase in the third sentence, mind our manners, is not.

The Reading Text, Mind Your Manners

First, there is a mismatch between the title given to the whole unit, **People and Customs**, and the title given to the reading text, **Mind Your Manners**. The writers of the textbook stated nothing about this mismatch. Second, both could not be a title of the reading text. **People and Customs** is too general to be the title of the reading text. **Mind Your Manners** is also irrelevant in relation to the overall idea of the reading text as well as the specific information given in it.

Background information is given at the beginning next to the claimed title of the reading passage: name of the writer and work experience, source of the

reading text (from the book entitled 'A Pattern of Islands'), and nature of the text (autobiography). Such background might help learners to extract the necessary information from the text. However, there is no instruction given on the reading text either before or after the given background: a reading text of twelve paragraphs appears immediately after the background information. In such cases, students do not know exactly what they do (purpose(s) for reading the text).

Exercise 2: Discussion on the Passage (as it is written)

This exercise appears next to the reading text entitled *Mind Your Manners*. There are four questions set under **Exercise 2**. These are:

- A. After reading the passage, how would you describe the type of writing that the author uses? Confirm this idea by giving examples from the passage.
- B. What would you say was the main aim (idea) of the author in the writing passage? Discuss with your classmates and then report back to the whole class.
- C. What is the point of view of Arthur Grimble in the above passage?
- D. Through your discussion, determine the topic of each paragraph.

This exercise has a lot of problems starting from the name given to it: **Discussion on the passage**. What does the phrase 'discussion on the passage' imply? The name given to the exercise implies that students discuss issues raised in the passage expressing their attitudes- a kind of reading beyond the lines. However, it seems that the questions are designed to help learners develop skills in critical reading and identifying the main points. Therefore, there is a mismatch between the name of the exercise and the intended aim(s) of the questions.

Second, clear instruction is not given for the students from the beginning. The writers of the textbook prefer to give instruction to each question. The given instruction to each question is not stated with appropriate selection of

words, and thus lacks clarity. For example, the first question begins with the phrase, 'After reading the passage', which implies that students see the questions before they read the text. However, the questions are placed next to the reading text; therefore, this phrase has wrongly been used. Moreover, words such as 'confirm' and 'determine' are normally used in giving instructions to students to carrying out tasks, or exercises.

Third, the questions are not properly stated in that it is very difficult to know their aims in relation to the given objective(s) of the unit at the beginning. For example, why do we ask students to describe the type of the writing? Of all, students do not need to read the whole passage to answer this question because of the fact that the introductory statement clearly suggests that the text is 'narrative'. Similarly, the third question is irrelevant to the intended objective(s) because asking students to identify 'point of view of writers' is more appropriate in creative literary works such as short stories and novels rather than in autobiography texts. Similarly, the last question is not a good question for two main reasons. First, there are twelve paragraphs in the passage so that asking students to identify the 'topic' of each paragraph is not logical as a topic usually refers to the subject matter of a given text/passage. In such passages, the common thing is to ask students to identify the main ideas of the paragraphs; not topics of each paragraph. Second, the reading text does not give itself to such kind of exercises. Students are asked to identify the main ideas of paragraphs that have, at least, two or more sentences. Furthermore, paragraphs 4 and 5, have only one sentence each. Moreover, the second is not properly stated. It is more appropriate to state, for example, the second question, as "What is the main aim of the writer in this text? What is your evidence?"

Exercise 3: Questions on the Passage (as it is stated)

There are fourteen questions set under this exercise: four open-ended, one fill in the blanks, two multiple choices and seven true/false questions. There are two strong sides about this exercise. First, an attempt was made to set variety of questions, though half of the questions are true/false questions.

Second, there are questions that ask students to read between the lines-questions that require understanding of the passage, and that are cannot simply be answered by referring to the lines.

However, there are also basic problems with this exercise, too. First, there is no instruction given to the exercise in general. An instruction is given to the seven 'True/False' questions listed under Item 8. The instruction given is, awkwardly stated: it says, "Write down the letters of the three true statements," which suggests that from the seven "True/false" questions, three statements are true. Moreover, it is difficult to know why students write 'only the letters of the three true statements.' The instruction should have been written as, "Which of the following sentences are true and which are false according to the information provided in the passage? Give your evidence."

Second, there are questions that have no answers according to the references made to some of the paragraphs. For example, Item 3 asks students to 'list four things that the writer should not have done and four things that the writer should have done' according to the information provided in Paragraph 6. Basically, there is no need to ask the same question twice: there is no concept difference between the phrases 'four things that the writer should not have done' and 'four things that the writer should have done'. According to Paragraph 6, there is only one thing mentioned that the writer did not do-'he omitted belching aloud', which implies that the writer should have belched aloud; therefore, it is difficult to find the remaining three things asked for in the paragraph.

Third, there are items whose aims are not clear. For example, the aim of Item 4 is not clear because of the nature of the question. The item begins with the sentence that states, 'Luckily the idea appealed to her (Paragraph 9)', which suggests that the question would be a reference type since it is written within inverted commas and a reference to the paragraph is made. However, nothing is said about this sentence, and an instruction that states, "Complete the following explanation adding a suitable word in each space"

follows, which is followed by two sentences with black spaces (the first sentence has two black spaces to be filled in with words and the second four). There are basic problems with these two sentences to be filled in. First, the aim of filling in the blank spaces is not clear: whether it is intended to help learners to practice the use of newly learnt words or to help learners develop the skill of summarizing texts. Second, it is very difficult to fill in the blank spaces in the second sentence because of the fact that what is required is not given in Paragraph 9. Moreover, asking students four blank spaces of a short sentence is too demanding.

Finally, of the seven 'True/false' questions, five are very short sentences that could be easily answered. For example, the first 'True/False' question can be easily answered without reading the passage from the background information given about the writer at the beginning before students read the passage.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the reading exercises in the currently in use textbooks in secondary schools in helping learners develop the intended reading skills. It is not difficult to conclude from the above discussion that there are basic problems in designing/setting questions that train learners in developing the intended reading skills. Based on the above discussion, we can infer the following main weaknesses inherent in designing reading activities in the currently in use English language textbooks **in high schools**.

- First, objectives of the reading activities are not properly stated; they do not indicate clearly the intended reading skill(s) to be developed. Therefore, they highly lack specificity in terms of skills to be developed in doing the activities designed.
- Second, instructions that guide students to carrying out the activities are not clearly stated. In fact there are cases where instructions are not given at all though they are very important. Where instructions are

given, they are either misplaced, or there are inappropriate uses of words, or there is a tendency to give an instruction to each question under the same activity, or a tendency to repeat the same thing again and again.

- Third, there are mismatches between the intended reading skills to be developed and the nature of questions designed to practice the skills. In other words, the comprehension questions are not properly designed in the way they help learners practice effective reading skills. For example, questions related to the pre-reading activities and the while reading activities are very poorly designed. There is no activity designed in relation to the post-reading activities to help learners go beyond the given reading text and relate what they read to their own experiences- one of the behaviors of the effective readers that learners should develop.

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