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# Deconstructing the Great Wall of Print

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Too many new words.”  
“There were many words I did not understand.”  
“I did not know some of the words.”

These are typical responses I hear from students every day as we read in the ABE English Transitional Program at the Asian American Civic Association in Boston’s Chinatown. Rarely does any discussion of reading begin with a focus on the content, the characters, the inferences, students’ reactions to the author’s point of view. For the Chinese adult learners in my classes, despite varying levels of education in Hong Kong or mainland China and length of time living in the United States, reading is, first and foremost, understanding the meanings of individual words. In four and a half years of full-time teaching at AACA, I have struggled with this situation, making little progress with students, most of whose experiences with reading in English involve “barking at print,” reciting the words without understanding the meaning. In thinking of multilevel issues in my classroom, reading seemed an obvious choice. But as I tried out different reading strategies, and in reflecting on them for this article, I found that the class was a lot less multilevel than I thought when it came to reading. Even the students who could usually “get it” when trying to make meaning from a text were using the same strategies employed by the lowest level students. I will document some first steps aimed at moving students beyond word-for-word reading and vocabulary as the be-all and end-all of their reading schema. This will be a modest attempt to begin to change students’ ways of thinking about reading in their new language.

The ABE English Transitional Program consists of three intermediate-level classes for immigrant adults who want to improve their English skills so they can continue their education in community colleges or

skills training programs. I teach Levels 2 and 3. Like most classes of English for speakers of other languages, each class is multilevel. People with university degrees—former teachers, computer scientists and medical researchers—study alongside those who never finished high school in their native countries. Eighty to ninety percent of the students are female. As one male student told me a few years ago, “In the Chinese family, the men work in the restaurants; the women learn English.” Most of the students say their goal is “to improve my English and get a good job” (usually meaning any kind of office work with benefits). Some have been in the United States for more than five years and are fairly confident speakers of English. Others are very new arrivals who may be afraid to speak but who are prolific writers with a decent grasp of English syntax. Reading seems to be the area which unites those at different levels in their inability to move beyond reading just for the words. Except for the occasional student who says she reads novels or newspapers, reading in English for most of these learners rarely goes beyond the closed captions of TV programs or videos. On the printed page the words are intimidating, so most students stay away.

In the ABE program, reading is not seen by teachers as a separate, disconnected skill but one that is closely tied to writing and discussion. During the first week of each cycle, students are asked to choose the content areas which they would like to study. The following subjects are among those selected in every cycle over the past four years: the American educational system, particularly higher education; health care in the U.S., particularly access to health care; changing roles in Chinese and American families, especially the notion of the non-nuclear family; and the nature of work in America, specifically getting a job

and understanding expectations of employers and American co-workers. In my first few cycles, despite having students read what I thought would be relevant material, I would watch helplessly as they punched the buttons on their electronic Chinese-English dictionaries to get the meaning of each new word as soon as they came across it in a text. In the past two years electronic beeping has given way to the shuffling of pages in all-English dictionaries, but the results are the same. Students do not seem to look beyond individual word meanings. This leads to frustration and self-doubt about their reading and language learning ability.

### **Linking Theory to Practice**

Despite students' levels of education in their native countries and their experience (or lack of it) in reading English, I have noticed that they approach reading as an attempt to scale a wall of print. Among the adjustments I am trying to make is to change the focus from the language to be comprehended to the role and state of mind of the comprehender. In their article, "Schema Theory and ESL Reading Pedagogy," Carrell and Eisterhold discuss the importance of background knowledge in language comprehension. This is presented as schema theory, where comprehending a text becomes an interactive process between the reader's background knowledge and the material (p. 556). And according to Clarke and Silberstein, more information is contributed by the reader than by the print on the page. That is, readers understand what they read because they are able to take the stimulus beyond its graphic representation and assign it membership to an appropriate group of concepts already stored in their memories (pp. 136-137). But these concepts are often culturally-based and culturally-biased, making it important for teachers to carefully choose materials that connect to their students' realities or to build schema with them, involving their background knowledge of the formal structures of different kinds of texts (poems, fables, short stories, newspaper articles, graphs, charts, maps, etc.), known as formal schemata. In the past, I have asked students to read things "cold." When teachers want students to manipulate both the linguistic and cultural codes (sometimes linguistically easy but culturally difficult, and vice versa), this kind of "cold" reading may be asking too much (Carrell and Eisterhold: 567).

To put some of these theories into practice, I tried a variety of strategies with my students as they were reading a particular story: 1) some free writing and discussion based on several issues raised in the text as a way to elicit students' background knowledge; 2) predicting key ideas raised in the text by using titles, idioms, the opening paragraph and the last sentence; 3) a post-reading activity that involved summarizing,

remaining questions about, and students' reactions to the story. I'll admit that being part of this multilevel project prompted me to do a bit more preparation with pre-reading activities, since I had not employed all of these strategies in such depth with this particular text in past cycles.

The story concerned an Asian immigrant's experience in going to a community college. Although it took place in another part of the United States, it mirrored the immigration experiences of the students in Chinatown. First, we looked at the idioms "to take charge of something," from the title of the book, *Taking Charge of My Life*, and "something hit me," from the beginning of the story. We could not predict anything from the title, since the story had no title other than the name of its author, Josephine Thanhgoc Nguyen (pp. 129-131). Since there were no Vietnamese students in this class, I didn't ask anyone to see if they could tell anything from the name, although the author's name may suggest something about the writer.

The next step was a pre-reading activity that examined four issues in the story which were closely related to the students' lives (see box below).

### **Josephine Thanhgoc Nguyen**

Before we read this story, look at the following questions:

- 1) If you go to college (this year or any time in the future), how will this decision change your life? What will be the barriers at home? At work? In the college classroom?
- 2) Does your family help you when you are having a problem in your life? How? Please explain.
- 3) "Women should not go to school and have a career. Women should stay home and take care of the family." Do you agree or disagree with these sentences? Please explain.
- 4) Are you the oldest child in your parents' family? Do you think the oldest child is different from the other children in a family? How? Please explain.

Now choose ONE of these questions. FREE WRITE for about ten minutes. Do not stop to look up words in the dictionary. (Don't worry about spelling. Just keep writing). Answer your question as specifically as possible. I will ask you to share your writing with the class.

In thinking about, writing, and sharing their answers to these questions, students were able to draw from their extensive background knowledge of dealing with family problems, juggling the responsibilities of learning English and managing a household, setting an example as the oldest child, and especially dealing with lifestyle changes when deciding to go to college. As with any free writing, it is a good idea for the teacher to also write and share. The next step involved making predictions. I chose to give students only the first paragraph and last sentence of the story: The first paragraph read:

Coming to the United States was one of the major assets that helped me get to college and my education. My strength and determination helped me overcome the obstacles I faced before me. These major obstacles were getting accustomed to a new country, its culture, its language, and dealing with my family's financial problems.

The last sentence was: "A little help will always make a difference in my future."

The theme of the opening paragraph was familiar to students, since many of them had written about their own adjustments to English, American lifestyles, and family financial difficulties. When the word "assets" came up, one student (a voracious reader) was able to give a credible definition. The phrase "overcome the obstacles" was also familiar to everyone, since each student had to put together an Individual Education Plan, a section of which focused on strategies to overcome personal barriers. By this time, I noticed that we had spent almost an hour and a half on pre-reading activities involving writing and predicting, reminding me of previous experiences where I, like so many other teachers, spent hundreds of hours helping students understand every word in a story rather than showing them strategies to help them get as much meaning as possible out of what they read. This reinforced my belief in the value of taking sufficient time before reading, rather than focusing immediately on all of the difficult words. Since the class was almost over, I gave students a few minutes to begin reading the story. There was not enough time to talk about the vocabulary. The following day I asked students to think about the story again by using a form which asked them to write a summary and any questions or reactions they had to the text.

There was some discussion about vocabulary, but much less than in previous reading assignments. I'm convinced that the choice of a culturally-appropriate piece, coupled with extensive pre-reading and the eliciting of important background knowledge, shifted

student focus away from the "many new words" to a closer identification with the main character's struggle, which was so similar to their own.

### **Reading for Information: Other Texts**

Readers read a wide variety of texts in real life—newspapers, magazines, billboards, mass transit advertisements, novels, textbooks—and they don't read all of these texts the same way. Another experiment involved giving students experience with formal schema, how different texts are organized and laid out. This idea was adapted from a workshop presented by Bea Mikulecky at the 1997 MATSOL spring conference. Students were asked to read to find small, specific pieces of information in a much larger text. First, each student received a copy of *The China News*, a free Chinese language newspaper available in the lobby of our agency. To get a better idea of their reading habits, I asked the students what they do when they read this kind of text. "We read the most important news first," someone said. "The lifestyles." "The local news because we live in Boston." "Entertainment, movie stars, singers, CD sales, food." "If I see something interesting, I will read every word."

After we established that most people don't read every word of a newspaper, students were paired off, with each pair receiving a copy of the Calendar section from a Thursday *Boston Globe*. Each group was given a few minutes to skim and scan, then report back to the entire group on something of interest. Next, each student received a vocabulary list (see box below),

#### **Vocabulary**

- Features - Special sections of a newspaper or magazine
- Skim - To look through a magazine, book, or newspaper quickly to see what is inside
- Layout - How a magazine or newspaper looks (columns, advertisements, size of the words, headings, pictures...)
- Bazaars - Places where you can buy used clothes, toys, furniture, like big yard sales
- Benefits - Events to make money for a certain organization
- Galleries - Places where you can look at or buy art
- Theater - Drama, plays
- Heading - Words at the top of a column in a newspaper or magazine to tell you what is included
- Highlights - The most important parts (for example, highlights of my week, my vacation, or a book)

which included key concepts students would need to understand because they served as category headings. No other vocabulary lists were provided. The next step was to ask students to examine the Contents and Listings page at the beginning of the Calendar booklet and locate the pages of different sections: Dance, Theater, Music, Children, etc. Then each pair was given a list of questions (see box below) requiring very specific information: an event's location, day, time, and ticket prices, among other things.

This activity proved to be time-consuming, but it was interesting to observe that students were not reaching for their dictionaries, even when they were unable to find the answer to a question. Most were able to talk their way through a problem with their partner or the teacher. Before the class ended, it was good to reinforce with the students what they did—navigate their way through an enormous amount of information for something very specific, taking just what they needed from the text and without focusing on what they didn't know. Using different kinds of texts can be an equalizer for students in a multilevel classroom because those

learners who are less comfortable with walls of print can use strengths other than individual word knowledge to extract meaning from the material.

One more reading activity proved worthwhile to help students move away from their dependence on a word-for-word approach to reading. It was similar to a cloze exercise, where about every sixth word was X'd out (see box on next page). The story was one that I wrote, based on the experience of Wan Ming, a student in the class who recently attended a job and training fair in her community.

First I asked students to read the story and ignore the missing words, although I noticed at least one student writing possible choices over each series of Xs. Later, I suggested that students try to substitute any words they thought would make sense. They had little difficulty with this, perhaps because they had received a flyer announcing the training fair a few days earlier. Although Wan Ming was the only one to attend, multilevel students were once again using their own background knowledge, since most of them had already investigated several training programs in Bos-

### *Reading the Globe Calendar*

1) Look under THE WEEK section. Answer these questions: (HINT: Look at photographs too!)

- What day is Bobby McFerrin singing? Where is he singing? How much are the tickets?
- What date will Ladysmith Black Mambazo perform? Where will they perform?
- What famous dance company will return to Boston on Tuesday, April 22?
- What day is the "Animals in Art" show? Where is it?

2) You will have to look in different parts of the LISTINGS to answer these questions. (HINT: Use the HEADINGS).

- Where can you find a free story book and craft hour for children? (Heading to look under: \_\_\_\_\_)
- What activity does the Boston Public Library offer for children on April 22? (Heading: \_\_\_\_\_)

- What movies are playing this week at the Coolidge Corner Theater? (Heading: \_\_\_\_\_)

- Where is the Back Porch Dance Company? What is their phone number? (Heading: \_\_\_\_\_)

- Where can children take April vacation art classes? (Heading: \_\_\_\_\_)

- On what date can you see the dance *Swan Lake* by the American Repertory Ballet Company? (Heading: \_\_\_\_\_)

- How much does the play *Hamlet* cost? Where is it? (Heading: \_\_\_\_\_)

- How much do the New England Square and Contra Dances cost? (Heading: \_\_\_\_\_)

- Where can you see a concert with James Brown on April 18? What time does the concert start? (Heading: \_\_\_\_\_)

- What famous scientist, inventor, and artist is featured at the Museum of Science? (Heading: \_\_\_\_\_)

### ***Wan Ming Goes to a Job and Training Fair***

Two nights ago, Wan Ming XXXX a job and training fair XXXX English High School in Jamaica XXXX. She lives near the school, XXXX it was very convenient for her. XXXX she arrived, she saw many XXXX giving out information for jobs XXXX training programs in the Boston XXXX. There were programs for office XXXX, resume writing, interview preparation, cover XXXX, and much more. There was XXXX a lot of information about XXXX kinds of jobs, such as XXXX, packing, assembling, supermarket and office XXXX.

The next day, Wan Ming XXXX the information to her ABE XXXX at the Asian American Civic XXXX in Chinatown. She gave her XXXX copies of the job and training XXXX flyers. Some of her classmates were XXXX interested in the training programs. XXXX were familiar with the training XXXX, but they enjoyed learning about XXXX kinds of jobs. Now Wan XXXX and the other students have XXXX choices when they finish the Level XXXX class on April 25.

ton. They knew the kinds of activities and materials they would find at a training fair. As I watched, students (even those who usually had the most difficulty with reading) breezed through the story, taking in more of its global meaning rather than stopping to figure out which words were missing. They liked this activity and felt a sense of accomplishment that came with the confidence of being comfortable with the content schema of this kind of text.

### ***Conclusions/Reflections/Looking Ahead***

Looking back at my experiments with these different approaches to reading, I found that students could see that reading involves more than just vocabulary. Here are some reflections about some of things that worked and how I could build on them in future cycles:

- *Extensive use of pre-reading strategies:* skimming, scanning, predicting from titles or headlines, and free writing/sharing around issues raised in the texts. The importance of these types of activities to bring out students' background knowledge (both content-based

and culturally-based) through writing and discussion before reading should not be underestimated.

- *Realizing that there are many kinds of printed texts; everything does not have to be in paragraph form.* As in the *Globe* Calendar activity, the direction of the reading was often from the top of the page to the bottom, or from bottom to top, not just from left to right. This supported my belief in using alternative texts—charts, graphs, tables, maps, cartoons—where meaning can be made from numbers and pictures, not just words. Using these texts can level the playing field of multilevelness, emphasizing the strengths of visual and spatial learners, as opposed to those students with big vocabularies.

- *Using a variety of texts on one subject.* In our Level 3 class, we spend about a week (and sometimes more) on issues concerning the changing nature of work in America: downsizing, “flexible/disposable” (part-time and temporary) workers, workers’ rights, the glass ceiling, sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace, and what different kinds of workers—blue collar, white collar, housewives—think about their jobs. This is an excellent opportunity for students to see the value of building background knowledge in content areas and to relate ideas found in different texts to each other.

- *Taking more risks with students in reading.* In the upcoming cycle, I will experiment with an out-of-class reading project where students will choose a short story or a long newspaper/magazine article, read it on their own, and discuss it in small groups or make a presentation before the entire class.

I hope all of these ideas will, in some small measure, make the printed page a little less intimidating to my students. Building on the strengths of what they already know and what they bring to a text, I feel more confident about exposing them to a range of reading strategies and materials, while being a little less concerned about their multilevelness, deficits, differences and problems to be fixed. •

### ***References***

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## ***How Americans Use Their Leisure Time***

**Instructions:** (Each group gets the same instructions but receives a DIFFERENT chart (Friday, Saturday or Sunday).

1) Look at the chart you received. You will see some of the most popular activities for Americans. Read all of the activities. The numbers mean the percent of Americans doing this activity on that day.

2) Make a list of the activities which you think would require physical exercise.

3) Add the numbers for all of the physical activities on your list.

4) After you finish, you will be put in another group where students looked at a different day. Talk with members of your group (and then the other groups) to see on which day Americans do the most physical activities when they have free time.

**Possible Pitfalls:** Make sure the group discussions stay in English. It is easy for homogeneous groups to slip into their first languages. Keep people moving so that each group member sits with the other groups who examined the other two days of the week. In this way, students are teaching each other. (IMPORTANT—Each group gets only ONE chart—Friday, Saturday or Sunday. Students don't see the charts for the other days until they move to another group).

**Why It Works With a Multilevel Class:** Even lower-level students could identify with many of the activities. The focus of the activity moved away from vocabulary to comparing and contrasting leisure time activities in the students' native cultures. It also helped build skills of categorizing many different activities into larger leisure time groupings. Students also worked on developing the skills of how to make inferences.

### FRIDAY

|                  |       |
|------------------|-------|
| Television       | 28.7% |
| Socializing      | 8.9%  |
| Reading          | 4.6%  |
| Do-it-yourself   | 4.0%  |
| Shopping         | 2.6%  |
| Eating out       | 2.2%  |
| Watching movie   | 2.1%  |
| Vacation         | 1.8%  |
| Time outdoors    | 1.6%  |
| Gardening        | 1.5%  |
| Sewing, knitting | 1.3%  |
| Self-improve.    | 1.3%  |
| Team sports      | 1.2%  |
| Hobbies          | 1.1%  |
| Spectator sports | 1.1%  |
| Swimming         | 1.1%  |

### SATURDAY

|                 |       |
|-----------------|-------|
| Television      | 26.6% |
| Socializing     | 8.4%  |
| Shopping        | 6.1%  |
| Do-it-yourself  | 5.0%  |
| Reading         | 4.6%  |
| Time outdoors   | 3.3 % |
| Swimming        | 1.6%  |
| Vacation        | 1.5%  |
| Golf            | 1.4%  |
| Eating Out      | 1.3%  |
| Watching movie  | 1.3%  |
| Fishing         | 1.2%  |
| Gardening       | 1.2%  |
| Cooking, baking | 1.1%  |
| Hobbies         | 1.0%  |
| Team sports     | 1.0%  |

### SUNDAY

|                  |       |
|------------------|-------|
| Television       | 26.2% |
| Socializing      | 8.3%  |
| Reading          | 4.3%  |
| Time outdoors    | 3.4%  |
| Religious activ. | 2.7%  |
| Vacation         | 2.1%  |
| Shopping         | 2.0%  |
| Do-it-yourself   | 2.0%  |
| Volunteer work   | 1.8%  |
| Eating at home   | 1.7%  |
| Gardening        | 1.7%  |
| Hobbies          | 1.5%  |
| Water skiing     | 1.4%  |
| Swimming         | 1.3%  |
| Eating out       | 1.2%  |
| Watching movie   | 1.1%  |
| Fishing          | 1.1%  |
| Team sports      | 1.1%  |
| Spectator sports | 1.1%  |

*—Richard Goldberg*