Writing a graded reader

Rob WARING

Introduction

Graded readers are a much misunderstood breed. Most teachers understand that graded readers are simplified books written at varying levels of difficulty for second language learners. They also know that graded readers cover a huge range of genres ranging from adaptations of classic works of literature to original stories, to factual materials such as biographies, reports and so on. Teachers are also aware that graded readers are written for many different audiences, ages and difficulty levels. However, not all teachers have a clear idea of their function and how they fit the curriculum and misinformation abounds. This article is in two parts. The first part discusses what graded readers are and provides many reasons why they are important in learning foreign languages. This section also reviews many of the issues and controversies that surround the use of graded readers and suggests that graded readers are an essential part of any curriculum. The second part of this article discusses many of the points that need to be considered when writing a graded reader.

What are graded readers?

Before we consider writing a graded reader we have to be clear about what they are, how they are used and how they are viewed by the end-users. But first we should be clear what a balanced curriculum looks like because from that perspective we can understand more clearly how graded readers become an integral part of the curriculum.

Nation (2001) suggests that any language programme needs to ensure that the learners get an adequate balance between input and output practice, and an appropriate balance of a focus on mastering accuracy within the language and a focus on building automaticity and fluency. These four elements of input and output practice, and accuracy and fluency, should also cover all the language skills of reading writing, listening and speaking. Grammar and vocabulary teaching are examples of language or accuracy focused input, and doing vocabulary and grammar exercises, pronunciation drills and controlled production activities are examples of language focused output. By contrast, activities that are focused on the message rather than the language such as free conversation, discussion, essays and email exchanges are examples of fluency based language output. Reading graded readers and doing extensive listening are examples of meaning focused input activities where working with the message is more important than attending to new language. It is this last element - meaning based fluency input practice – which is most commonly absent from many language programmes. Very few teachers would say that a language programme can do without free speaking or discussion activities to help the learners practice to speak, so why do without fluency input such as from graded reading and graded listening?

One of the main functions of graded readers is to create a series of stepping stones for foreign language learners to eventually read unsimplified materials. It is fairly obvious that beginners cannot read unsimplified material enjoyable because of its difficulty, and in order to get the learners to the level where they are able to read unsimplified texts, they need to be stepped through materials of increasing levels of difficulty until they reach that point. By writing books at different difficulty levels (by simplifying the grammar, vocabulary and plot as well as adding illustrations to ensure adequate comprehension at that level) we can create these learning conditions.

At the early stages of reading in a foreign language the learners would read graded readers that contain a very limited vocabulary of say 300 different word families and with the easiest and simplest grammatical constructions and a simple plot. As the learners become fluent and confident at reading graded readers at this level, they progress to books which have a more difficult vocabulary, grammar and plot and fewer illustrations, and so on until they can feel they are able to tackle unsimplified texts. This is the same principle that we adopt for children learning their first language and graded readers are just mirroring this for second language learners.

Types of graded reader

There are several kinds of graded reader. Some are adaptations (the story is changed and simplified for a different audience) or abridgements (keeping the main story but changing difficult grammar and vocabulary) of classic literature such as Dracula, The Pearl, Little Women, Pride and Prejudice and so on. Others are called originals which are mostly fictional stories. Another kind of graded reader has a basis in fact and are in effect reports. These may include biographies, environmental reports, festivals, reports on countries or companies, historical events and so on like those in the Oxford University Press Factfiles Series.

In North America the term basal readers is often used to refer to reading materials which are simplified, but these are not the same as graded readers. Basal readers are written at various school grade levels for children learning to read their first language, while graded readers are specifically written for second language learners. The basic principles of language control underlying the construction of both types, and both are also controlled for maturational development, complexity of plot and interest and authors of both tend to use lists of words which learners are expected to know at that ability level.

The major difference between EFL reading materials for children and the L1 children’s reading materials is that children starting to read their first language already have knowledge of several thousand words before they begin to read. So when they learn to read they only have to match the written form with an already known meaning and pronunciation. Moreover, their knowledge of such a large number of words (often cited as several thousand by the age of 8) enables them to guess unknown words from context more successfully. By contrast, second language children do not have such a store of...
Moreover, the rate of introduction of new words and language in L1 materials is higher than EFL children can cope with making reading slow and laborious at times for the L2 children reading L1 materials. They also frequently misunderstand because they lack the relevant cultural background. While little hard evidence exists, it seems that much of the language and grammatical patterns used in the EFL children’s textbooks and class materials are not always similar to those found in L1 children’s materials. This may be because of the tendency authors to write EFL children’s textbook materials based on practice of certain grammatical patterns and other language forms (e.g. the ‘be’ verb, ‘opposites’, ‘the present tense’ and so forth). This focus on form is often extended to supplementary EFL reading materials and leads EFL children’s materials to be less natural than L1 materials. Thus many of the L1 children’s books already published many not be entirely suitable for EFL learners.

The various uses of graded readers

Graded readers can be used in several different ways and understanding these ways is important for the authors of graded readers so that they can be written with particular approaches in mind. The first approach to using graded readers is to use them to practise the skill of fast fluent reading. This approach is often called Extensive Reading or graded reading. Graded readers are mostly used for the practice of fluent reading with the linguistic aims of practising the skill of reading, building word recognition automaticity, and focusing the learners on the message rather than the language as well as a whole host of other factors (See Day and Bamford, 1998 pp. 7-8 or Waring, 2001). In Extensive Reading, the learners generally select their own texts at their own ability level and read at their own pace.

The second approach by contrast, is to use graded readers in a language and focus on form approach to reading activities. This is often called Intensive Reading. It is one which often involves many pre- and post-reading activities such as the completion of comprehension questions, vocabulary activities, and so on. The aim is to dig into the text to pull out grammar, vocabulary, discourse features and son on and expand and explain the plot.

The third approach lies somewhere between the Intensive and Extensive reading approaches and can be labeled the ‘Class Reader’ approach. In both the Intensive Reading and Class Reader approaches all the learners use the same text and work on it together. The difference is that in the Class Reader approach the focus is often on the story or plot, characterization and tends to see the work as a piece of literature than as a tool for practising language. The aim of the Class Reader approach is for the learners to read the same text and complete many language-focused and comprehension check activities together often over several lessons. In a Class Reader approach, the class will finish the book, but in an Intensive Reading approach they may not. In addition to these three approaches, the Reading Skills approach focuses on the building of discrete reading skills such as learning to scan and skim, and learning how to deal with unknown words and so on. Graded Readers can be used as source texts for all of these approaches to reading.

Learners read graded readers for different purposes. They can read easy material to improve their reading speed and fluency, or they can read at a level where a few words are unknown which allows for the picking up of some of these words. Alternatively, they can read a more difficult graded reader with more unknown vocabulary, patterns and grammar and read it to learn language rather than to enjoy the story and build fluency as in the Class Reader approach. We can thus see that the same graded reader can be read by 3 different learners of different abilities but for very different purposes. Clearly a learner who finds a text too difficult will not be able to read it smoothly and develop fluency with it while another learner who finds the text very easy will not meet many new words to learn.

From the above, we can see that authors of graded readers should write their book to be used for many purposes by learners with different abilities. The most typical way to do this is to include intensive reading activities that accompany the books either inside the book or in separate (often downloadable) worksheets. Authors should also be aware of the difficulty level of the activities that supplement the reading compared to the fluent reading level. A graded reader written for intermediate learners means it can be read fluently by learners at that level. But the same book will be suitable for Intensive language work by lower ability learners who cannot read it fluently. If however, the intensive reading activities in the Intermediate level book are advanced, the Elementary learners may not be able to do the activities. Thus a useful rule of thumb is to have intensive reading activities that are of one level of difficulty above the fluent reading level of that reader, and to ensure that the difficulty of intensive reading activities is approximately the same across a level within a series.

There are two ways that these activities are spaced in the books. Some series (e.g. Cideb’s Black Cats and the Oxford University Press Dominoes series) have comprehension, grammar and vocabulary activities after each chapter or section. This allows teachers to go through the text as a Class Reader by dealing with one chapter at a time over several classes because each chapter can easily fit one period of a reading class. However, this style of book has the disadvantage that fluent continuous reading is disturbed by constant interruptions and thus they are not suited to an Extensive Reading approach. Moreover, this type of Reader is does not lend itself to developing a class library because once the activities have been completed in the book, it cannot be used by another learner in the same way. Other series have these activities at the back of the book (or elsewhere) so they do not disturb the reading for those learners who wish to treat the book as a novel and read it extensively.

Some misunderstandings about the nature of EFL reading

Unfortunately, many teachers do not seem to be aware of the varied uses to which graded readers can be put and tend to classify them in simplistic terms seeing them as having only one main purpose. In fact considerable misunderstanding about the nature of EFL reading abounds. The vast majority of language teachers would say that the best way to learn to read is by reading a lot, just as they would say for speaking, listening and writing. However, in practice most teachers do not often recommend their learners to read a lot. Moreover, the main form of reading practice in EFL classrooms involves comprehension questions and language analysis in the form of intensive reading activities. It is therefore helpful for us to examine some of the reasons why this curious situation has developed.

By-and-large, in the EFL world, teachers see graded readers as an ‘extra’ or ‘supplemental’ way of getting extra input outside the classroom, or more correctly outside the textbook. Moreover, many teachers see fluent reading practice as so ‘supplemental’, they do not recommend any at all. Worse still, in many language institutions around the world there is a complete absence of graded reading materials despite an understanding of their usefulness.

It is not entirely obvious to me why teachers and curriculum planners tend to see fluent input practice as a supplementary
context. It is fairly obvious that learners whose L1 and L2 share many similarities (such as Italian and Spanish) may be able to
read it in the original. This is not to say that graded reader adaptations and abridgements are of an inferior quality. There are
no reasons that this same philosophy should not be extended to non-natives. Moreover, coursebooks, exercise practice books
and even teacher language are graded to different ability levels and it seems unfair to single out graded readers for criticism.

We should not consider Literature as something that is to be kept pure and untouchable to be accessed only in the original,
but as one whose lessons and insights can be faithfully re-presented and re-packaged for a different audience. As the saying
goes: “there are horses for courses”. The very popular Reader’s Digest has done this for years for English speakers and there is
no reason that this same philosophy should not be extended to non-natives. Moreover, coursebooks, exercise practice books
and even teacher language are graded to different ability levels and it seems unfair to single out graded readers for criticism.

We can take this argument further by suggesting that it is not necessary that language teaching (or in a wider sense graded
readers) be a mirror of the unexplored language, in fact it can never be. By trying to faithfully reflect unexplored language,
graded reader authors are trying to create something that cannot be (re-) created. We have to understand that the EFL
classroom and EFL materials are not and never will be authentic examples of “real English”. We can only ever approximate
and as Widdowson said because we are removing it from its natural environment this naturally de-authenticizes it.

It is important to keep in mind the notion that EFL means English as a foreign language or English for foreign language
learners. This is not the same as teaching English to foreign learners. Teaching English to foreign learners assumes that
“English” remains a constant, definable whole where in fact it is a movable feast with various accents, dialects and so forth
spread around the world. One could therefore argue that there is no one thing called “English” – there are only variants of
one vague common core.

This implies two things for foreign language learning and the writing of graded readers. Firstly, we cannot use graded readers
to represent “the English language” at least in an “authentic” sense. We can however use common elements of English
usage and vocabulary and the recurring patterns that occur within the various Englishes of the world. Secondly, it implies
that no one owns “English”. Moreover, learners with different mother tongues will see the English language from very
different perspectives and what may be “foreign” for one learner of English may not be “foreign” to another, or even
completely alien to another. The notion “foreign” refers to its relationship with a mother tongue and speakers of each
language will have a different view of what “foreign” means – the one from their perspective. For example, English as a
foreign language for Spanish learners of English is different from English as a foreign language for Malays because they are
looking at the same object – English – from different bases. The grammar, cultural assumptions, discourse styles,
pragmatics, pronunciations and so on of the two first languages are vastly different, not to mention their vocabularies.

We can thus see that there is no one single unified English as a foreign language either. There is English as a foreign language
for Malays, English as a foreign language for speakers of Hangul and English as foreign language for French speakers: and so forth.
Therefore, when writing graded readers we can only ever make the forms of English available to non-natives within their
own contexts of use as their version of English as a foreign language. Moreover the language we present should be to provide
them with the tools to create their own version of English as Foreign language. It can never be ‘real’ English.

Another objection to graded readers (especially those adapted from previously published works), refers to the notion that
the simplification of a text strips away authorial clues, the style of the original author as well as cultural and other clues in
the original version clues. The argument suggests that the original work is watered down so that it only resembles the original
work in plot and characterization, not in prose and authorial identity. These objections are valid, but graded reader
adaptations are never written to faithfully re-present and re-package the whole text. Rather, they are written to
provide a sense of the story. These books can also be seen as a “way in” to the Literature of another culture. And as we
have discussed, only learners of a certain ability level would be able to comprehend and understand the fine points of a
classic work of literature anyway.

It is only when a critical reading ability threshold is reached that one can see clearly the beauty of the prose, the elegance
of the discourse, hidden intentions, subtle inferences, authorial style, allusions, allegory, rhythm and so on. This threshold level
is probably extremely advanced. For learners not at this level, these things can only be experienced second-hand, by reading
another book which explains why it is a classical work. It would be a curious theory of reading that insisted that learners not
at this level read works in the original so they can understand the literature when they do not have the tools to appreciate it.
A similar parallel would be to give a high quality and rare wine to someone whose palate cannot appreciate it. Surely it is
easy and less troublesome to give them an abridged or adapted version first, and later as their ability improves, let them
read it in the original. This is not to say that graded reader adaptations and abridgements are of inferior quality. There are
numerous adaptations of classical literature that are extremely good and are very readable in their own right regardless of
whether they are graded readers or not. (See for example many of the adaptations at levels 5 and 6 in the Oxford Bookworms
Library Series.)

One of the most common objections to graded readers refers to the quality of the adaptation or simplification process. Some
researchers (e.g. Honeyfield, 1977; Yano, Long and Ross, 1994; Young, 1999) suggest that certain types of simplification can
hinder rather than enhance comprehension. They suggest that learners read unexplored level material so they will get
massive exposure to new words and new language and thus pick them up incidentally. Furthermore, that say that graded
readers which have relatively few unknown words reduces the opportunities learners have for practicing guessing from
context. It is fairly obvious that learners whose L1 and L2 share many similarities such as Italian and Spanish may be able to
pick up a large vocabulary quite quickly, but this is not the case for languages which are quite different, such as English and
Japanese.
Research in this area seems to suggest that until a certain threshold has been attained learners simply will not be able to pick up much from their reading, let alone understand it. A high degree of understanding is a prerequisite for successful guessing of unknown words and thus represents the most important threshold that learners must cross before they can cope with the next level. If the learners do not understand the context within which new language is found, then it will be nearly impossible for them to guess the unknown word’s meaning.

Another of these thresholds is vocabulary coverage. Hu and Nation (2000) point out that where there is more than one unknown word in 50 the chance that the learners will be able to guess the unknown word is, at best, minimal. Native level materials are full of known words for intermediate and lower learners. Often as much as 5% of unsimplified texts is made up of words which appear only once (Nation 2001) which provide a formidable stream of interruptions to fluent reading for second language learners. Thus unsimplified texts can appear to be nothing but a demotivating noise to be slogged through. A third threshold is the size of vocabulary needed to read non-technical unsimplified texts with relative ease. Research seems to suggest that this is around 5000 word families which is usually called an ‘advanced’ vocabulary.

Yano, Long and Ross (1994) suggest that graded readers cause problems for learners because they inhibit comprehension thus providing poor conditions for learning. Their concern is that the sentences in graded readers are short and rely too much on cohesive ties for progression within the stories which make them difficult to comprehend. Certainly in the past some graded readers were poorly written, especially those that over-emphasized structural elements over storyline and interest, but this is no longer true for hundreds of graded readers currently available to learners.

Although it is not a direct objection against graded readers, some teachers seem quite happy to ignore graded readers completely. They do not consider the fluency practice of listening and reading as important at all and do not advise their learners of its importance. Other teachers are aware of the benefit of graded readers but see them as a ‘supplemental’ (‘nice but not necessary – read them if you have time’) role. Worse still is the oft-given advice to lower ability learners to ‘just read this (unsimplified) novel or newspaper and you will soon learn to read’. Learners simply cannot deal with unsimplified input competently and confidently in a native-like manner until they are way passed advanced level. No one would expect a child to read and understand an adult novel so there is no reason to suspect that all language learners regardless of ability can read and understand unsimplified text and enjoy it. It is far more likely that the experience will be painful and one to be avoided in the future.

So where have these misunderstandings come from? Some of the reason may lie in the types of texts many teachers use. The 4 skills coursebooks tend to have short intensive style reading activities which may lead both teachers and learners to believe that this type of reading is the only one that is important when learning to read. Moreover, on teacher training courses and in teacher training books there is far more emphasis put on how to deal with and exploit reading texts from an intensive perspective and little is mentioned about the need to practice the skill of fast fluent and enjoyable reading. And several teacher training course books neglect to even mention Extensive Reading or graded readers at all, but these thankfully are becoming a rarity! Both these things can lead to distorted perspectives and misunderstandings.

Writing graded readers

In this section we shall discuss many of the most important points to consider when actually writing a graded reader.

Getting started

Graded readers are not published like novels. Publishers do not commission graded readers as one-off titles as they do novels, they publish them in a series. This is necessarily so because of their function. Graded readers have to work together as a team to build EFL reading skills and have to fit a pre-determined plan decided by a publisher or a series editor. The series editor will therefore be looking for titles of a certain type and even if a particular work is excellent, if it does not fit the publisher’s series then it will be rejected. Therefore, it is important for authors to be familiar with the types of graded readers currently being published by the publishing houses and to request from them guidelines for what they are looking for. Several reviews of various series are regularly published and make for an excellent overview (E.g. see Thomas and Hill, 1993; Hill, 1997; Hill 2001).

Authors should also be aware of the degree to which certain topics and themes are permitted by various publishers because their policy may affect whether an author would wish to write or not. Some publishers do not wish to alienate readers from certain backgrounds and request their authors to refrain from certain topics such as drugs, sex and violence or even discussions of alcohol, bars and smoking. Other publishers do not have a firm policy on this. The treatment of delicate areas (including politics and religion) must be sensitive, but this does not prevent authors from bringing up controversial issues. The publisher will undoubtedly have guidelines as to what is acceptable and unacceptable content. These guidelines will also frown on couching opinion as fact, and where explicit criticism of any practice could cause problems for teachers.

Once a series and publisher and topic have been decided it is essential when constructing an overall plan that the structure of a graded reader be similar to books in the same series in genre, linguistic and other ways. This is essential for the publisher as they have to ensure that each title at a certain level is roughly equivalent to others. In principle, it is best to try to stay within the guidelines for writing and within the publisher’s framework or guidelines.

The most important consideration

There are three things that are important when writing a graded reader – a) the story, b) the story, and c) the story. The characterization, plot (or information content), its development and treatment are paramount. If it is not, then the learner will put the book down half-finished and will be reticent to pick up another one. A positive reading experience is particularly relevant for both teachers and learners who are reading a graded reader for the first time because their first experience is should be achievable and motivating. This seems to imply that linguistic considerations should take a backseat to the plot and it would be a grave mistake to assume that “anything goes” when writing a graded reader. At all times the author should be focused on writing a book whereby the reader would finish it feeling it was a ‘good read’. There are two ways to approach the writing of graded readers. The first is to write a good story without being too concerned about grading for a particular level in the belief that the grading can come later. The other is to find experienced people who understand what can be comprehended at various ability levels and ask them to write to that audience using their EFL grading knowledge. While a good EFL adaptor does not always make for a good storyteller, a good story can be ruined by
The main theme of the story should emerge from the plot and characterization, rather than by creating scenes to fit the plot because this can result in heavy-handed writing. It also adds to coherence. Developing the ideas can be difficult at times so imagining the person or setting in the mind’s eye can help flesh out reasons why characters are in certain positions, sitting in certain ways, and doing certain things in relation to others. All this will help build characterization, tensions, settings or even the world being created and in turn help the selection of words to write. The reader should feel the story not have it told to them.

The plot of course should not be predictable and it does not necessarily have to be told in a linear fashion, but must include a series of dramatic moments each hinting at several plausible directions the story may lead. Keeping the reader guessing and unforeseen endings are always preferable. The story should also have a logical progression that becomes apparent at some stage, and it should lead to a satisfying conclusion but this does not imply that every loose end needs to be tied up. On occasions leaving things unresolved may suggest that the characters will live on after the story ends, suggesting a certain realism as well as leaving things open for sequels. Emotional resolution is often more difficult to achieve than plot resolution and considerable care should be taken over this.

Authors should also be careful about making the storyline too complex for beginning readers who may soon get lost in a maze of plots and subplots and a bewildering array of characters. The plots need not be complex but can be simple and plain provided they have passion and richness in their development and the importance of what is at stake for the characters should show through. It is therefore important to think through the logic of the positioning of parallel plots, sub-plots and flashbacks in relation to the main story as it is all too easy to go off topic. Similar considerations should be made for pacing with careful attention being paid to the ratio of new to old ideas and language so as to not overload the reader.

Fiction authors are often advised to write from experience, but this should not mean that everything should be from one’s own past experience because library research and second-hand experiences can help deepen and thicken the plot and setting and so forth. Reading the work of other authors within the same genre is therefore essential in getting a feel for the genre. It will also be important for authors to see the structure in other authors’ writing to see how they construct their fiction by paying special attention to their use of transitions, verbs and the balance between summary and scene and so forth. When doing this it is useful to ask oneself how the scenes are constructed, how they link together and what affect these have on the writing style and the development of the story. Crucial in this is good linkage between exchanges, scenes, chapters and so forth.

The old adage that “the first paragraph should hook the reader, and the first chapter should make them hungry for the rest of the book” applies as much to the writing of graded readers as to any fiction. An essential part therefore of the writing process is extensive revision and may at times involve fearless pruning of scenes, a whole character, a chapter or even a whole ending. One should also not be afraid of cutting out some excellent carefully honed but ill-fitting paragraphs simply because they are excellent. It will not be time wasted because the end product would not have been made if it were not for the original writing.

**Characterization and setting**

The characters should be believable but not wooden and predictable. Neither should they be larger than life. The best remembered characters are usually flawed in some way and need their own personality, pasts, motivations and so on and should appear human – likeable, scary or vulnerable, for example. Their personalities need pushing and developing and may involve some change in character by the end of a story (e.g. they may have learned love and family are more important than ambition). However, there is no need to over-elaborately describe minor characters unnecessarily and the various dimensions of the personality of the main characters should emerge as the story progresses rather as one long description near the beginning of the book.

The authors may care about their characters, but the reader will not until they get to know them. Therefore, the characters should be kept separate and easy to remember, even to the point of giving each character differently pronounced names. The aim should be to reduce confusion and ambiguity for the reader and insist on clarity. So as part of the writing process there may emerge a need to merge several characters into one or split a complex character into two. The setting too must be believable and it is often better to use a known setting rather than an imaginary one, or to draw it out on a piece of paper so that characters don’t turn left at the end of their street and end up in two different places in different chapters!

**Voice**

Voice is an important consideration. It involves not only the point-of-view (whether first person narration, a third-person view limited to what the character knows and sees, an all knowing omniscient view, and so forth) but also involves style, word choice, atmosphere, tone and subject matter. It is common not to change the point-of-view in graded readers as this can lead to confusions especially at early levels. Whether a story should be light and airy, or reflective and profound, or dark and mysterious will be determined to some extent by the subject matter, setting, characterization and plot.

One’s own writing style (that is retained from book to book) is an important consideration for many authors and it is instructive to experiment with various styles before settling on a particular one. Some authors prefer a dense descriptive style, while others prefer to leave things unsaid but imagined. One way to explore this is by writing the same scene several times each with a different tone, one comic, one emotional, and another spookily ominous, for example until one gets it ‘right’.

**The importance of background knowledge**

Authors have to consider what content knowledge the learner will need in order to understand the cultural or informational assumptions and precepts in the text. Clearly themes and scenes that contain highly culturally specific information will be more difficult to grasp than those shared by many cultures or languages. For example, a European audience would probably find European folk tales easier to comprehend than African or Arab folk tales whose discourse structure, characterization and cultural assumptions differ from those general used in Europe. Thus care must be taken when writing the graded reader to ensure that this background knowledge is made explicit in the text in ways that highlight the differences. This is especially relevant if the graded reader is to be read internationally.

It is sensible to know one’s subject. For example, writing about Arabs will be difficult unless one has had experience with
Revision of the text is essential. It is not uncommon for the text to be re-written entirely two or three times before a final draft. Arabs, their ways and so forth. Researching one’s subject is vital if the plot and characterization are to be believable. It is wise therefore to consult others about any elements which may cause problems, particularly those that may offend or mislead.

Language control

It goes without saying that graded reader authors need to be aware of what EFL readers can do with English at certain ability levels and be familiar with where they might probably be heading next. This is why many graded reader authors are EFL teachers who have an intuitive feel for what an appropriate level might be. Too much new language slows the learner down as does too many facts or pieces of information. Careful attention to anaphora (backward reference using pronouns e.g. she, this) prevents overload, avoids ambiguity and facilitates reading forward, so that readers do not have to look back to see who or what is referred to. Similar care should be taken with the overuse of cataphora (forward referencing) and references to things not in the text (exophora). Authors should also try to avoid too many passive forms and embedded sentences, preferring to use constructions that are simple and clear rather complex. Similarly the writing should avoid unnecessary flannel, and keep sentences short and clear using appropriate vocabulary. At all times it will be important to disambiguate for the learner.

Publishers produce graded readers at varying levels of difficulty. Level one may be restricted to the most common 500 different word families, level two the most common 1000, and so on. The vocabulary at these levels is determined by exhaustive examination of the kinds of words learners are likely to meet both within their own learning and in the wider world outside the classroom. Each publisher will have its own word lists and levels as a guide for authors and it is always wise to consult these before writing. Most publishers see these word lists as a guide only and without the intention of restricting the author too much, but to try to give the reader a chance to meet the most useful vocabulary before the rarer words, and to ensure that the reader does not get distracted by too many unfamiliar words. There will be times when one cannot stay within the word lists, but it is prudent not to contort the message to avoid using the most appropriate word. At time certain words outside the lists can be illustrated, generalized or paraphrased so that learners can work out the meaning. Alternatively they can be put in a glossary at the back of the book.

The comprehension of a text is enhanced by the careful conceptualization of new words. This can be achieved by making sure that they are met in an unambiguous context or explained by the surrounding text; the use of illustration at lower levels; and repetition of new lexis. The over-use of simile, idiom and metaphor is likely to provide an unnecessary burden to many EFL readers as are an overabundance of adjectives and adverbs. Verbs are usually the key to a good sentence and it will be useful to look at how other authors have chosen their verbs by underlining them in a graded reader of the same genre. In a similar way clichés (such as “a dark and stormy night”) should be avoided so as not to make the book feel dry and lifeless.

Successful reading comprehension is dependent on lexis, text type and context, and semantic load rather than grammatical grading. Moreover, grammatical difficulties may well occur at the text rather than sentence level through lack of cohesion, or poor reference, for example. A further cause of difficulty may be ‘grammatical lexis’, e.g. phrasal verbs. All the publishers of graded readers produce a grammar syllabus as well as vocabulary lists as a guide to the grammatical structures allowed at each level. Usually the levels are established in relation to their own in-house syllabus, and to the grading of other series of readers. The levels show which grammatical forms can be used at each level and they are cumulative so that each succeeding level includes all those below it. Just as the lexical levels are overridden by the requirements of the reader, so most publishers are flexible about these grammatical levels which can be overridden with occasional use of forms from the level immediately above when the context is clear and the needs demand it.

Writers may wish to consult the level specifications before starting to write to get a feel for it, and then consult the specification again on completion of writing to check that they are on target. However, experienced EFL authors might find it easier to just write the graded reader and worry about grammar and lexis at the editing stage.

Revision of the text is essential. It is not uncommon for the text to be re-written entirely two or three times before a final draft is deemed suitable for submission to a publisher. Once the work is nearing completion, reading the story aloud can help find passages that are awkward or lengthy as well as highlight boring sections or when the story is drifting too far from the main plot unnecessarily.

The process of simplification

The source text for a graded reader is either an original script or idea or a previously published text that will be modified (either abridged or adapted) into a graded reader. The difference is important because an author and editor have quite different tasks to perform depending on the type of source text used. An adaptation of a previously published text involves shortening it, by cutting out paragraphs, removing events, and in extreme cases eliminating characters or even whole chapters or sections of the book may be necessary. This involves a complete re-write of the text from the ground up with the concomitant restructured sentences, referents and so forth. Necessarily this is going to make the adaptation unlike the original work and remove many of the authorial clues common to the works of that author. Instead the work will take on the particular authorial (and editorial) style of the adaptor.

Writing an original title from scratch is different in that the plot can be mapped out and follow the author’s imagination and feel for the story which can emerge as the author writes. There are few if any constraints on the plot other than those dictated by the level of plot that the learners at that level can cope with.

We have already discussed ways in which an original text can be simplified by shortening it, omitting characters, and by providing a simpler account of the story. However, there are other forms of simplification that operate at the sentence or multi-sentence level and authors of both adaptations and original works will need to decide how to grade the reader to the appropriate level. There are, several ways in which a text can be graded. Lexical substitution involves the use of easier or already known words instead of more difficult and less useful ones. This can take place not only at the individual word level but also at the phrase level and will probably involve a change in the collocational and colligational relationships.

Modifications based on a cognitive processing perspective include paraphrasing, clarifying, elaborating, explaining ad providing motivation for important information and making connections explicit (Beck, McKeown, Sinatra and Loxterman, 1991). Authors can also write including redundancy and explicitness to help the reader deal with unfamiliar items. Such modifications might involve ensuring clarity of referents, the removal of unnecessary pronouns, the deletion of irrelevant details, the use of context clues, and highlighting important sections, for example. The degree of simplification will depend crucially by the level of the book. Beginning and intermediate learners will need to have their material modified in some ways, but this may not be so relevant for more advanced readers. The specifics of simplification are quite technical matters and are beyond the scope of this article (see Honeyfield, 1977; Tickoo, 1993: and Young, 1999, for more details). Each
Many graded readers contain dialog and one’s choice of dialogue should reflect the characterization of each speaker. Some characters will be laconic, while others may be chatty or secretive and suspicious. Dialogue should be unforced and without unnecessary exchanges (such as “Hello, how are you?” “I’m fine”) and should be moving the plot forward or develop characterization and resolving or creating conflict as well as adding emotional energy. Authors should not try to encapsulate natural conversation with all its false starts, umms and errs, stammerings and so forth because written dialog is for reading not speaking. Reading one’s dialogue aloud will demonstrate that it only resembles real conversation, and that it is in fact only edited reality.

Illustrations, Charts. Tables etc.

It is very common when writing graded readers to use illustrations to provide comprehension support to the story. Publishers require authors to supply a numbered list of illustrations as a separate artwork brief which describes the illustration in as much detail as possible. However, care must also be taken to ensure that illustrations that depict characters using specific or local gestures in their natural context may not add comprehension support to the story, or worse be completely misunderstood by the readers or create stereotypes. In many factual titles (e.g. Oxford University Press’s Factfiles series) some publishers now include sidebars or fact sections alongside the main text to add variety and make the look more like a report. These also provide practice in different reading skills needed to read text especially written for sidebars.

It is not always wise to select clip-art from CD collections or the Internet as permissions are not always available, and in many cases the original author is unknown which may lead to legal problems for the publisher. This advice would extend to any non-original materials that might be used. Thus keeping detailed records of what and who is cited and where and when, is really important so that the publisher can follow it up to get permissions.

When ideas run out…

Often authors get stuck for ideas as they write. At these times it is wise to take a break to reflect and stand back and read voraciously within the genre. This gives the author time to both enjoy the books and to look at the approach other authors have taken to develop story elements and style. Others feel that changing one’s daily rhythm to get inspiration, or being a strict self-disciplinarian and forcing yourself to write can work. It can also be helpful to re-write an unsatisfactory scene from a different sense, for example by describing the smells rather than just the sights. Some authors like to attend writer’s conferences or workshops, or even create a writer’s retreat where a group of people lock themselves away for a few days to write and motivate and critique each other’s work.

Getting published

When all the hard work is done, the author needs to pay attention to the process of getting it on the shelves. Careful presentation of the finished product is important and should include looking for spelling mistakes (there are always some) and setting out the work to look professional. There is no need to be too fastidious about details as most editors will know by the end of the first chapter (or even the first paragraph!) if they wish to accept the work or not. The fastidiousness comes at the end of the production process not in the authorial stage. Finally, there are likely to be many changes to the work of art before it hits the shelves and being too protective over its contents may create an unnecessary barrier to publication.

Bio

Dr. Rob Waring is co-author or series editor of 3 series of graded readers by Cengage Learning

References


What's black and white and read all over? Jeremy Taylor's graded readers. Today's guest writer, Jeremy Taylor, is a freelance writer and teacher trainer based in South West France. He has written over 40 books including many readers. If your students don't read very much in English, read his article and perhaps you can convince them to start. I love second-hand bookshops. Recently I was browsing through a French second-hand bookshop and came across a copy of Charles Dickens' 'Hard Times'. I opened it up and saw that someone had been using the book to improve his or her English. On each line