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The End of Reading

(posting to dogme ELT discussion list: www.groups.yahoo.com/group/dogme)

[The following posting was part of a thread in which it was debated whether reading skills transfer naturally from L1 to L2. If they do, why teach them? Why not simply provide the conditions for successful transfer? In other words, why teach reading at all?]

Just came across this (by Catherine Wallace in *The Cambridge Guide to TESOL*, 2001, ed. Carter and Nunan):

"Alderson (1984) raises the question... whether reading is a reading problem or a language problem. He concludes, unsurprisingly, that it is both. Much depends on the stage of L2 development. In the early stages L2 knowledge is a stronger factor than L1 reading ability. L2 readers need a minimum threshold level of general L2 language competence before they can generalise their L1 reading abilities into L2. Where proficient L2 learners are good readers in their L1, the consensus view (based on a wide range of research studies and teachers' observation) is that reading abilities can, indeed, be generalised across languages even in the case of differing scripts". (p. 22)

To me the implications of the above are:

1. At lower levels, use texts not to teach reading but to develop L2 proficiency (e.g. for the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, as well as as models for writing, or as springboards for discussion).
2. At higher levels, design reading activities that encourage the transfer of L1 reading skills (such as using authentic texts and setting tasks that compel the learners to process these in an authentic - ie. real-life - way)
3. Only "teach" reading skills to those (high level) learners who are poor readers in their L1. (With the corollary that it might be better to teach them these skills in their L1, if possible).

Further implications of the above might be:

1. Coursebook writers should label texts not as READING but as TEXT (except at higher levels where specific reading strategies are being targeted, but see below)
2. Coursebook texts do not need to be as long as they are in order to be

exploitable for language teaching purposes. A 50-word text is likely to have enough vocab and grammar packed into it to keep your average low-int class busy for a couple of hours at least. Most coursebook reading texts are in fact simply time-fillers, and if used solely in order to extract gist, are about as pedagogically useful as watching an episode of *The Office* with the sound off.

3. Getting rid of READING texts from the beginner to intermediate syllabus would effectively free up hundreds of hours of classroom time, as well as substantially reducing the length (and cost) of coursebooks.

4. At higher levels, the kinds of texts that motivate learners to transfer their L1 reading skills to the reading of L2 texts are those that are intrinsically motivating, i.e. that engage the learner's needs and interests. Since few coursebook reading texts succeed in doing this, it might be better to eliminate reading texts from higher level books as well, and substitute them with tasks such as: "Find a text on the Internet about a famous person you admire/a place you would like to visit/a sport or game you used to play....etc. Print it off, bring it to class, and be prepared to share it with your classmates." In class, the task might be - in pairs - to read one another's texts and ask each other questions about them in order (a) to clarify any language difficulties, and b) to explain and justify the choice of text. Then they report on their partner's text to the whole class. Again, by eliminating reading texts from high level coursebooks, classroom boredom time is reduced, coursebook length is slashed, and whole tracts of Amazon rain forest are spared.

The end of reading as we know it!

(Scott Thornbury)