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Writing for your readers: Tools and approaches

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As teachers, we adjust our language to meet our students' needs, but these choices can sometimes be based on flawed intuitions. In planning a lesson, we intentionally include or exclude forms or vocabulary to support learning goals. But once in the classroom, even the most experienced teacher's ad hoc judgments can be wrong. Learners' immediate responses should provide feedback, but this loop is broken when writing for learners; we do not have direct access to their understanding. Therefore, external checks on our linguistic choices become helpful. This workshop will demonstrate real world examples of using of corpora, text analysis tools, and other resources to analyze language. Participants will try tasks to see how these can be used to inform decisions when writing graded language. Teachers will leave better informed about the linguistic content of graded readers and with practices they can apply to their own writing and teaching.

教師は学生のニーズに合わせて自分の使う言葉を調節するが、時に不完全な直感に基づいた選択をすることもある。授業準備の際は、学習目標に沿って、表現形式や語彙を意図的に取り入れたり省いたりする。しかし授業中は、最も経験豊かな教師の臨機応変な判断でも間違いを起こすことがある。学習者の直接の反応は教師にとってフィードバックになるが、学習者のために執筆しているときには、この呼応が成り立たない。読者が理解しているかどうかは、直接情報が得られないからである。そのため、使用言語をどう選ぶかについては、外部の判断材料が役に立つ。このワークショップでは、言語分析のためにコーパス、テキスト分析ツ

ルや、ほかのリソースなどの実例を提示する。参加者には、これらのリソースを英語学習者向けの言語で書く際にどう使うか理解してもらうために、タスクを試してもらおう。このワークショップで、教師は英語学習者のために易しく書かれた本の言語的内容について、より良い情報を得ることができるし、練習を積むことで、自分で書いたり教えたりするのに応用できるようになる。

A few years ago, I made a somewhat rash decision that deepened my appreciation of language for learners and connected research with practice. I was planning a course with a narrow reading approach in the science-fiction genre. The capstone assignment was Vonnegut's satiric, dystopian *Harrison Bergeron*. I wanted accessible texts to help students build background knowledge and work with genre conventions in English. Some existing graded readers supported this goal, but I needed something a little bit darker so I chose to adapt and self-publish my own as ebooks.

Public domain source texts, basic reading level indices, online corpus tools, and ebook stores may not match the resources of major publishers, but are enough to let any teacher begin. I took the plunge and soon found myself recapitulating the last few decades of discussion around the benefits and problems of simplification.

Anne Lamott wrote, “You take the action, and the insight follows.” Having already wrestled with writing graded readers gave me a better understanding once I turned to research findings, commentary, and argument. I made creative decisions and looked to theory for guidance later. I doubt I would have finished those first couple of readers if I had set out from within the narrowed constrictions of the ongoing argument and various prescriptions.

Not a simple debate

Most arguments against simplification begin with Honeyfield’s *Simplification* in 1977. Day and Bamford (1998) reframed the perceived weaknesses of simplification in opposition to a strict demand for authenticity, but left the discussion open. Nation and DeWeerd (2001) continued with a vigorous argument for simplified reading materials written with known vocabulary. However, the argument is far from over, and it is still common to hear the same concerns again and again—especially around authenticity, simplified content, and vocabulary.

Authenticity

Widdowson (1998) pointed out the possibility of authenticity of works written for learners. I wrote for my students. Instead of handing out photocopies, they went to an online bookstore to download their readers from among thousands of other published books. Knowing that many other people—some of them most likely native speakers of English—had freely selected the same books they were reading, shifted the context out of the classroom and brought the learners into a community of readers.

Graded readers also became more authentic for me. I had sometimes found reading them as preparation for class a chore, and I’m probably not the only one. Instructor copies of readers sometimes sit on the shelf untouched by teachers. Writing gave me a new reason to read. I started to appreciate good graded readers for their craft. Even the occasional dud became interesting from a *that’s not how I would have done it* perspective.

Methods of simplification

I started off down a well-worn path by selecting texts and then interpreting each paragraph and refactoring each sentence into simpler elements as close to the original as possible. This reformulation approach is common and can be faithful to the plot, but the experience of reading the story suffered. I began to depart further and further from the original. Later, when working with an editor, I felt even more of a license to make changes. Through this approach, I had reinvented the most popular wheel.

The other approach is prescriptive. Using existing series as models, I resolved to follow an exacting grammatical syllabus. However, I soon put the list aside and went with what felt best for a known audience—my students. My feelings of failure for not slavishly writing from the rulebook were assuaged by learning that such an intuitive approach is sometimes recommended (Day & Bamford, 1998). There are indications that intuitive simplification at the low level tends towards more features related to comprehensible input than simplification at higher levels (Crossley, Allen, & McNamara, 2012). So, perhaps I had been on safe ground all along.

Vocabulary and wandering in the headword forest

Adapting an authentic text to a low headword count is a linguistic challenge as well as a creative one. Native English speaking teachers may not be good at judging word frequency intuitively (McCrostie, 2007). An external reference is necessary. Unfortunately, most major publishers do not publish their headword lists. I wanted to publish with actual data: the number of headwords and frequency. Tom Cobb’s Compleat Lexical Tutor <lex tutor.ca> made this a relatively trivial task—or so I thought.

For my first reader, I tried three different vocabulary profile measures: General Service List-based; BNL2079-based (Hancioğlu, Neufeld, & Eldridge, 2008); and Bauer and Nation British National Corpus-based lists. These gave very different word family counts. The number of headwords is not solely a characteristic of the text, but also of researchers’ choices when defining word families. I began to question headword

counts generally. Using publicly available measures, Eldridge and Neufeld (2009) found that readers from one publisher differed greatly from their stated headword count and were sometimes higher than indicated.

Moving forward

Computational analysis of syntactic, rhetorical, and other text features has become possible relatively recently. Coh-Metrix software goes far beyond readability indices such as Flesch-Kincaid (Crossley, Allen, & McNamara, 2011). Early analysis using these tools has begun to counter some assumptions of simplified text authors (Crossley, Louwarse, McCarthy, & McNamara, 2007). This new research analyzing corpora of simplified texts rather than just comparing and interpreting brief good and bad examples is the difference between data and anecdote.

Young, but thriving genre

There are still comparatively few published authors of graded readers in English. Considering West in the 1920's as the start, ELT learner literature is less than 100 years old. Accessible corpus tools have been available for a generation. New word lists such as the BNL2079 are even more recent, and others are coming along. Besides Coh-Metrix, more software for syntactic analysis is under development. Interested teachers now have powerful tools to help them create more of the good simplified learner literature we want, and less of the bad. Doing that writing becomes a process of thinking about good language and literature for learners.

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