A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Reading Materials

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1. Introduction:

In recent years there has been a great deal of discussion in Thailand of the English language needs of tertiary level students. One constantly recurring theme is that our students need the language as part of the process of gaining access to the knowledge of their specialist subjects, much of which is only available in academic textbooks and articles written in English. Thus it is widely agreed that English programmes at the tertiary level should lay particular stress on developing the students' ability to read relevant academic texts written in English. There is, however, no one accepted, uniform approach to developing this ability: different institutions in Thailad, as we are discovering during this conference, have adopted different approaches and strategies[1]. This is as it should be; the "right" approach for each institution will and should vary to a greater or lesser extent to accommodate different circumstances, practical constraints, and student needs and expectations. In this paper I shall describe the approach we have adopted at Chulalongkorn University for the first-year Foundation English Reading Course, and I shall show how we have tried to build the underlying principles of our approach into the reading materials that we are at present preparing for the first-semester course. But first I shall briefly consider some of the important practical considerations which have influenced the way we have looked at the problem.

2. Practical considerations:

There were four main factors which placed practical constraints on our approach, namely:

1. the considerable gap between the reading ability in English of many of our students when they enter the University and the level of ability they need to enter a full EAP reading programme;
2. the wide range of academic subjects studied by the students;
3. the attitude of many of the students towards the study of English;
4. the self-instructional learning model which the University has decided to adopt.

The low level of reading ability of many of our new students meant that the first-year programme would have to be seen as a pre-EAP programme which would lay the foundation upon which the EAP courses could be built. At the same time this would satisfy another criterion set by the University, namely that the first-year course should contribute to the general education of the students. The wide range of faculties to be served determined that the textual materials used, at least in the first semester-course, would have to be on non-specialist topics of general interest, a constraint which does not apply at, Chiengmai, KMIT, and AIT, for example. Thirdly, there was and still is a strong feeling among the Ajarns responsible for teaching "service" English that many of their students have a negative attitude to further study of the language. It was felt that, among many complex interacting factors, the inadequacy and irrelevance of the language programmes which most of the students follow at secondary school is a major cause of their negative and consequent low motivation. In brief, then, it was agreed that our reading programme should not resemble the type or approach and presentation to which the students had previously been exposed with such unsatisfactory results.

Finally, the decision to adopt a self-instructional learning strategy placed considerable constraints on the way the content of the materials was to be presented and the types of exercise that we could build into the lessons. In a self-instructional programme all instructions and explanations have to be explicitly and clearly stated in the students' text which has to assume the presentational role normally performed by the teacher in the classroom; also the exercises have to be self-evaluative, so that the answers have to be unambiguous, which leaves little room for open-ended questions which can be used to stimulate class-room discussion. It is also difficult to build in exercises, for example, which involve students in working together to elicit information from each other in order to complete a task.

These, then, were some of the practical constraints. Their effect on the way the pre-EAP "Foundation Reading" course was planned should become apparent in the remainder of the paper.

3. Reading: a multi-dimensional activity:

In the title to this paper I have used the term "multi-dimensional" to describe our approach to Chula's first-year reading programme. This term begs many theoretical questions and it would require a separate paper to give them the attention they deserve. Briefly the term relates both to:

1. the encoding process, that is, the way meanings are organized and realized in a text by the writer;

and 2. the decoding process, that is, the way these meanings can be extracted from the text by the reader.

In the encoding process the writer has a set of meanings or information that he wants to communicate. Jones and Roe (1975:5) describe this set in terms of "conceptual procedures"; more simply we can refer to them as the *semantic content* of the message. These meanings are expressed in the actual text through its *linguistic form* at the lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels. This does not explain, however, how the content of the message is translated into the linguistic form. There is a set of devices which organize the content into a text; these are usually called *rhetorical devices*. They control the amount and density of information contained overall and at any point in the text and they give it a coherent formal and semantic structure. So, three major factors, or "dimensions", are involved in encoding a text, the *semantic content* which is realized in *linguistic form* by a set of *rhetorical devices*, thus:

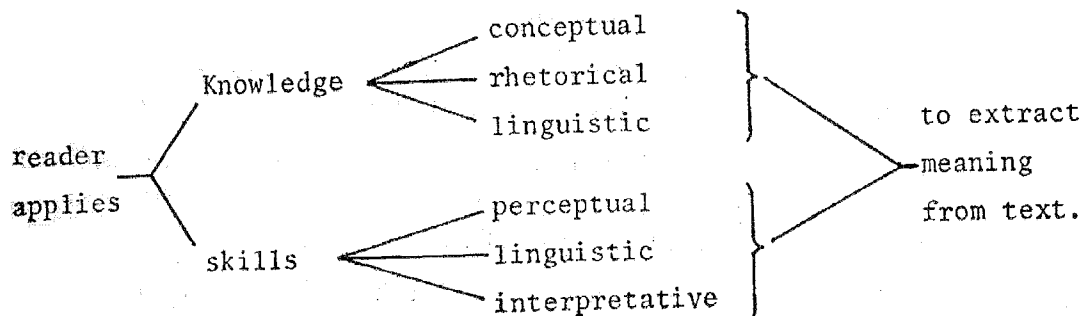Semantic Content ←→ Rhetorical Devices ←→ Linguistic Form.

It is now widely accepted that the rhetorical organization of a text is hierarchical[2] and that it should be seen as "a hierarchy of integrated functions that serves a set of conceptual distinctions and has reflexes in the grammar". (Jones and Roe, *ibid:* 5). As far as we and our learners are concerned, this means that our students will not be able to read English with understanding simply by knowing a large number of English words and having a basic mastery of the linguistic system. Far more than this is involved. Again, we may view the decoding process as a "multi-dimensional" activity.

In order to decode a text, the reader refers to his store of accumulated knowledge to help him interpret what he is reading. There are three main types, or "dimensions", of knowledge involved, namely:

1. knowledge of the world, which we may call conceptual knowledge;
2. rhetorical knowledge of the purposes or functions that language performs;
3. linguistic knowledge, i.e. of the language system.

To read a text with understanding, then, the reader must be able to exploit those parts of his conceptual, rhetorical, and linguistic knowledge which are relevant to that particular text[3]. This level of understanding will depend in the first instance on the extent of this knowledge. However, knowledge alone will not ensure comprehension. This will depend on the selection and application of that knowledge, in other words the cognitive *skills* which the reader exploits in the decoding process. These are *perceptual, linguistic* and *interpretative* (or conceptual) skills that relate to the decoding of the graphic symbols, the linguistic forms, and the meaning that the linguistic form communicates for the reader. Thus, reading for comprehension involves the interaction of the readers' knowledge and skill in

the extraction of meaning from the text. Both his knowledge and skill have several dimensions. Thus the process of decoding a written text may be seen as a multi-dimensional activiity which may be summarized as follows:

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                              conceptual  ⎤
            Knowledge  ⟨───── rhetorical  ⎬⟍
          ╱                   linguistic  ⎦  ⟍
  reader ╱                                    ⟩  to extract
         ╲                                   ╱⟵ meaning
  applies ╲                   perceptual  ⎤ ╱    from text.
           ╲ skills   ⟨────── linguistic  ⎬╱
                              interpretative ⎦
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I shall now turn to the application of the multi-dimensional view of the reading process to the preparation of the first-year reading materials at Chula.

4. Chula's reading materials; a multi-dimensional approach:

Our fundamental concern at Chula is that, after finishing the Foundation English reading course, our students will be able to read authentic, non-specialist nonfiction texts in English with ease and understanding. This also constitutes the level of reading proficiency that they need to attain before they can enter the relevant EAP reading course. In order to achieve this aim the students must:

1. have an extensive receptive knowledge of English vocabulary and a basic mastery of English syntax;

2. have a strategy for decoding unfamiliar words or known words used in an unfamiliiar context and complex structures at the phrase, clause, and sentence levels;

3. recognize the rhetorical structure of the whole text and of its constituent parts and the way the parts interact in the creation of the whole,

4. understand the writer's rhetorical purpose in order to understand better the informational content of the text;

5. exploit the appropriate linguistic and interpretative skills in order to arrive at a semantic interpretation of the text.

Most of the students already have a large receptive knowledge of English vocabulary and syntax, although it is often dormant as well as being poorly learned and ill-understood. Frequently, however, they have little understanding of how the

system is related to the purposes for which it is used nor of how the system and rhetorical purpose interact in the creation of meaningful text. Fundamentally, then, we saw our main objectives as:

1. making the student aware of how English as a language system is used to realize meaningful texts;

2. showing him how to extract meaning from a text by reference to its linguistic, rhetorical and conceptual structure;

and   3. encouraging him to view reading as a multi-dimensional, interactive process as he is acquiring the knowledge and skills that he needs to read English texts with understanding.

To achieve these objectives we decided that the Foundation Reading course should focus on five interacting strands, namely:

1. reading skills (particularly the skills needed for extracting general and detailed information from a text);

2. getting the meaning strategies:
   a) at the word level (exploiting internal and external context clues);
   b) at the structure level (unravelling complex structures);

3. rhetorical purpose and structure;

4. textual cohesion (formal devices[4] for maintaining semantic continuity through a text)

5. the relationship between linguistic form and function.

We feel that this last strand is particularly important. In the first place it should introduce the students to the idea that the English words and structures which they have been studying for years as part of the language system are used for particular purposes and to communicate particular messages. In addition, and in some ways more importantly, they will be reviewing what they already know, albeit inadequately, in a new, fresh and, therefore we hope, interesting way. Thus this component of the course is seen as having an essential, implicit remedial role while at the same time overtly introducing the students to, what is for most of them, the unfamiliar concept of language function.

The five main strands[5] in the course which I have described above do not represent a major theoretical advance. Indeed they are common-place features of most recently-published materials designed to improve the reading ability of learners of English. Perhaps a little more unusual, however, is the way we have decided to treat them. In the first place, we have consciously tried to teach them.

In most published materials these strands are practised, that is, the students read a text and then answer questions on it relating to all or some of these strands; they are not taught. Secondly, we have decided that aspects of all or some of them should be taught and practised in each lesson in an attempt to develop the students' awareness of the multi-dimensional and interactive nature of the reading process. To illustrate these, and other principles, I shall now describe how a reading lesson in our first-semester course is structured[6].

5. The reading lesson; principles and structure :

In determining the structure of the lessons in the reading component of the first-semester course we have kept in mind certain fundamental principles which relate specifically to the texts used, the focus (or learning) points of each lesson, and the self-instructional learning mode. In the first part of this section I shall discuss these principles which in large part provide the rationale for the way the lessons are structured. I shall then go on to describe the structure of the final version of a lesson as we see it at the moment.

5.1 Principles :

1. Texts :

   a) Only single-paragraph texts are used in Course 'A'[7]; the paragraphs gradually increase in length from about 100 words in lesson 1 to about 250 words by the end of the course.

   b) As far as possible the texts used should be authentic, i.e. they should not be specially written by the materials writers but taken from original sources and addressed to native speakers or non-native speakers who are fluent and frequent readers of English texts. Ideally the texts should be presented in their original form, although it is accepted that in some cases minor modifications may need to be made. The writers should use a text which they have written themselves to meet the requirements of the lesson only as a last resort, that is, when they have failed to find a suitable authentic text. In such cases, the writers are instructed to imagine that they are writing for a native-speaker audience and to define the rhetorical purpose of the text in advance. This purpose should not be to facilitate language learning.

   c) Fifty per cent of the texts used in Course 'A' should refer to aspects of life in South East Asia, particularly Thailand. The remainder should be of global interest. In this way it is intended that some of the texts should relate to the students' previous knowledge and experience, which should facilitate comprehension, while the others will broaden their cultural horizons as part of their general education.

2. Focus points:

   a) Each lesson should focus on several learning points, each one related to one of the main strands in the course discussed earlier.

   b) The focus points should be exemplified authentically in the texts that they follow, which should not be specially constructed to throw the focus points into unnatural prominence.

   c) As the course develops there should be regular and cumulative practice of what has been studied previously with the exception of the grammatical points which are already a review of what the students have studied in secondary school. In the later lessons review questions in each lesson should cover all of the main strands in the course, though not all of them should be covered after each text.

3. Self-instruction:

   a) The lessons should be designed as learning aids. Thus, the focus points should be explicitly presented, explained, and exemplified as well as practised. In addition, the practice exercises should be self-evaluative so that the student can check his answers immediately and so learn from his mistakes when they occur.

   b) The presentation and instructions should be simple, clear and informal, and they should aim at involving the student directly in the learning process.

   c) Presentation and practice should be as varied and interesting as possible to neutralize the threat of boredom which is a potential (and perhaps inherent) feature of self-instructional materials.

   d) The students should know what their learning objectives are in each lesson so that they can assess their own progress.

With these principles in mind we were able to determine the structure of a lesson.

5.2 The structure of a lesson:

     Each reading lesson in Foundation Course 'A' is introduced with a statement of the focus points of the lesson which have been stipulated in the syllabus specification. The focus points are then rephrased as learning objectives so that the student knows what he is expected to have learned by the end of the lesson.

     The introduction is followed by the body of the lesson which contains four sections, though the number sometimes varies. Each section contains a one-paragraph text on the principle that ultimately the help we are trying to give the student will be of little use unless he is given ample opportunity to read English texts and so practise using the knowledge and skills that he is acquiring. Sections A-C are mainly for presentation, explanation and practice of the focus points of the lesson, while section D reinforces the focus points with further practice. Again, this format is flexible, and there are occasional variations. In the later lessons

there are two sets of review questions after each text, each set dealing with previously studied aspects of one of the learning strands listed for cumulative practice. One of these sets of questions should relate to the semantic content of the text.

Each section begins with a text, although this is sometimes preceded by an informal statement of the learning point(s) of the section or a focussing question related to the text. The text is printed with a wide margin on either side ; the left-hand margin is used for noting linguistic and rhetorical feature of the text while in the right-hand margin potentially difficult lexical items are glossed or are noted for dictionary practice after the student has read the text. It is hoped that the linguistic and rhetorical notes will help the students to read the text analytically, while the vocabulary notes are located so that the student is given immediate help with (potentially) unfamiliar words with minimal interruption of the reading process..

In sections A-C, after the short review questions which follow the text, the focus points covered in the section are presented, explained, and exemplified by reference to the text which the student has just read. The principle is that the student should meet the focus points as they occur naturally in a text before he is given a formal explanation of them. The explanation is then followed by one or more practice exercises to reinforce learning. As far as possible, where an exercise specifically practises a linguistic feature, the instructions are framed in such a way that the student task is set in a context and his attention is focussed on one of the functions that the feature realizes rather than on its form as part of the linguistic system. Section D follows a similar arrangement except that in most lessons no new focus points are presented and the exercises which follow the text give further practice of the points which have been dealt with in earlier sections of the lesson. Throughout the lesson after each exercise the student is asked to check his answers, which are given on another page.

From lesson 4 onwards[8] a section on getting the meaning of unfamiliar words in a text without reference to a dictionary[9] follows section D. The principle is that, while the students need to know how to use a dictionary, they should be discouraged from looking up every word in a text which they do not know as they are reading, a process which interrupts the reading process. In the first place they should learn that it is not necessary to know the meaning of every word in a text in order to understand what it is about. Secondly, they should learn to exploit internal and external context clues[10] to make a reasonable guess at the meaning of a particular word in a text. Thirdly, they should be encouraged to note words they do not know with the page and line reference so that they can look them up in the dictionary after they have finished reading.

Finally, at the end of the lesson, the learning objectives given at the beginning are repeated in the form of a series of questions. The purpose of this is to encourage the student to assess his own learning performance. Where he feels that he has not achieved a particular learning objective he is referred back to the relevant section in the lesson for further study[11].

This description of the structure of a first-semester reading lesson may be summarised as follows:

Stage :	Content :
1. Introduction :	Statement of focus points and learning objectives of the lesson.
2. Sections A-C :	1. Single-paragraph text; 2. Cumulative review questions; 3. Explanation, exemplification, and practice of focus points.
3. Section D :	1. Single-paragraph text; 2. Further practice of focus points covered in Sections A-C.
4. Section E :	Getting the meaning strategies at the word level: presentation and practice of internal or external context clues.
5. Conclusion :	Restatement of the learning objectives as a series of questions addressed to the student.
6. Answer Key[12] :	Answers to all the practice exercises in the lesson.

6. Conclusion :

In this paper, after pointing out some of the practical constraints which have influenced the way we have approached the first-year reading programme at Chula, I have tried to explain what I mean by the term "multi-dimensional" as applied to the activity of reading and why we have used this term to describe the approach that we have adopted, specifically with reference to the preparation of our first-semester reading materials. I have then shown how we are attempting to apply this approach by first looking at the fundamental principles which have provided the rationale for the way the lessons are structured and then describing the structure of a lesson in its final as we see it at the moment. There remain two final points that I wish to make regarding our approach.

In the first place, I have deliberately avoided making any reference in this paper to any of the different theories or methodological approaches which have dominated TEFL debates in the last ten years or so. This is because we prefer not to be labelled. None of the widely used descriptive terms in currency, such as structural, notional, functional, behaviourist, and cognitive, adequately describes what we are trying to do since we have incorporated in our approach elements from all

the approaches represented by these labels. In other words we have been *eclectic*, selecting from a variety of sources those insights which seem relevant to the aims and objectives that we have set for the course and the needs of our students. In this sense, too, our approach may be said to be multi-dimensional.

Finally, as well as being eclectic, we believe in being *pragmatic* and *flexible*. Thus, although we have tried to build our approach on a set of theoretical principles, we do not consider these principles to be either sacrosanct or absolute. Our first-year reading course must be fully operational by June 1979. Between now and then, the course materials will be tested with groups of first-year students from several faculties at Chula. Students and staff participating in the pilot tests will be asked to comment in detail on all aspects of the course, and the course materials will be revised once this feedback has been evaluated. If the results of the pilot tests show that the approach fundamentally does not work then we shall change it. Ultimately, in our view, the final version of any materials must reflect what has been shown to be effective in real and relevant learning conditions and must eschew what has been shown to fail, *even if this runs counter to the underlying theoretical principles upon which the course was originally based.* At this stage in the preparation of our reading materials, following two small-scale experiments, there are indications that we are working along the right lines. However we shall have no hesitation in modifying or radically changing our approach if the pilot tests prove that our optimism is ill-founded.

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NOTES

1. Although there is a large area of common ground among them in terms of the theoretical perspective and underlying principles on which the different approaches are based.

2. See Lackstrom et al. (1973). Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), Jones and Roe (1975), and Mountford (1975).

3. His interpretation of the text will also be influenced by his expectations and his attitude to the subject-matter as well as the knowledge that he brings to it.

4. These include:
   1. grammatical and lexical signals of reference;
   2. logical connectors;
   3. discourse markers.

5. In addition there is a pre-course unit on how to use the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English: Third Edition (Hornby, 1974)

6. See the sample lesson specification and lesson appended to this paper. The Lesson is a first draft and does not as yet include all the elements referred to in this section, These, for example the cumulative review questions, will be added when the lesson is revised later this year.

7. Multi-paragraph texts are introduced in the second-semester course (Course 'B').

8. There are thirty lessons in reading course 'A'

9. In Course 'B' the focus changes to unravelling the meaning of complex structures at the phrase, clause, and sentence levels.

10. I take internal context clues to refer to word-formation in English, i.e. affixes and (predominantly) latinate roots. External context clues are clues in the surrounding context which help to define the meaning of a word as it is used in the particular part of the text.

11. It is also intended that in cases of persistent difficulty the student will be able to discuss the difficulty with his academic supervisor or a course tutor.

12. We are not in fact committed to placing the answer key at the end of the lesson. In the preparation of the lessons for the pilot test we are varying the location and layout of the answer keys in order to establish the most effective presentation.

Unit	Lesson	Reading Skill	Function	Notion	Structure	Getting the Meaning
VI	16.	Differentiating types of supporting detail: 1. Example	Micro: 1. Expressing probability. 2. Giving examples	1. Modality (III): Future probability (I). 2. Conjunction (I): Exemplification	1. 'Ought to'; 'should'; 'will + probably + INF. 2. Phrasal verbs: Intransitive (e.g. break down, give in) 3. Markers of exemplification: (e.g. for example, for instance)	*Internal Clues:* Roots (IV). (see handout, p. 4)
	17.	2. Restatement	Micro: 1. Expressing improbability. 2. restating	1. Modality (IV): Future improbability. 2. Conjunction (II): Restatement	1. 'Should not' 'be + unlikely to + INF.' 2. Phrasal verbs: Transitive: position of particle:- a) short noun-phrase Objs. b) pronoun objs. c) long noun-phrase objs. 3. Markers of restatement: (e.g. in other words; that is to say).	*Internal Clues:* Verb-forming:- 1. prefixes 2. suffixes (see handout, p. 4)
	18.	Review: 1.) Example 2. Restatement	Micro: 1. Expressing permission given/not given.	1. Modality (V): Permission given/not given (present/past)	1. a) can/may; b) could/were allowed Aff. and Neg. 2. Prepositional verbs: a) position of obj. b) meaning of verb unchanged 3. Review markers of exemplification and restatement.	*Internal Clues:* Number Prefixes (see handout, p. 4)
VII	19.	Differentiating types of supporting detail: 1. Explanation	Micro: 1. Expressing obligation/no obligation (past/present) 2. Explaining	1. Modality (VI): Obligation/no obligation 2. Conjunction (III): Explanation	1. a) 'Must/have to' b) 'Must not' v'does not have to' c) 'Had to' v 'did not have to 2. Prepositional – Phrasal Verbs	*External Clues:* 1. Example