

To infinity and beyond. Reading in 21st century English language teaching

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Resumo

A leitura deveria proporcionar a oportunidade a estudantes de línguas estrangeiras de viajar pelo nosso mundo fora (e mais além). No entanto, os textos dos manuais apresentam pouca variedade e as tarefas pós-leitura focam-se, na maior parte das vezes, na forma da linguagem em vez do significado do texto. A escolha dos textos e das tarefas subsequentes devem estar dependentes do que os estudantes querem ler e precisam de aprender, algo que é raramente encontrado em manuais produzidos em Portugal. A atual abordagem adotada para a leitura nas aulas de Inglês exige uma reestruturação radical.

Palavras chave: Ensino de Inglês, Leitura, Variedade de textos e tarefas, Importância no mundo real

Reading texts should provide an opportunity for foreign language learners to travel around our world (and even to boldly go beyond our world) but English Language Teaching (ELT) coursebook texts display little variety (Hurst 2014) and post-reading tasks often focus on language and/or skills work and not on constructing and/or exploring possible text meaning(s). Learners need to interact with the different types of texts, guided by different types of comprehension questions that focus on different levels of comprehension (Day & Park 2005). There is a sharp disconnect between the reading that occurs in the ELT classroom and the reading we do in the ‘real’ world: what foreign language (FL) learners are required to do bears little relationship to the kind of reasons we read in the ‘real’ world.

According to Pandian (2011) we usually read in the ‘real’ world for leisure, for recreation, for entertainment or to learn about arts and culture; or, we read for knowledge about history, science, philosophy and so on, perhaps related to a field of study; or, we read to perform tasks which may be work-related have a functional need or be motivated by personal goal achievement, or, finally, we read for empowerment: to assist with decision making or planning or for self-improvement of some kind. This inventory contrasts sharply with how learners read in the ELT classroom. Nunan (2003) describes the now classic activities of ‘skimming’ and ‘scanning’ related to so-called reading comprehension questions, using a text as a context for vocabulary development or to provide examples of a specific grammar point or as a prompt for the expression of personal opinions (speaking or writing practice). Masuhara (2003) reiterates this description of texts being used as sources of teaching points and adds the idea that texts are often selected on the basis of their ‘fit’ with the unit topic or theme; she states that

little or no consideration is given as to whether the texts are useful, interesting, engaging, involving or relevant to the learners' lives ('real' world reasons for reading a text). This being the case, learners are not specifically being required to focus their attention on the most important aspect of reading: understanding and appreciating the MEANING that the author/text is trying to convey (Field 2002).

Given the universality of reading texts in coursebooks, they are a highly significant feature of this educational macro-genre and are imbued with legitimacy through this very same omnipresence: «Textbooks are generally taken as a kind of genre presenting the fact objectively, and materials included are usually assumed to be true and hence, do not usually encourage critical thinking» (Amalsaleh *et al* 2010: 2052). This legitimacy (and lack of criticality) is in turn passed on to the language and content of the reading texts and it is the content, which is a focal point for the FL teaching process. Notwithstanding, the main agents in the classroom, individual teachers and learners, certainly condition and transform the meaning(s) of what is in the texts so that it is difficult to equate the text itself with what is actually taught or learned: «One cannot determine the meanings in a text by a straightforward encounter with the text itself because readers do not passively receive texts, but actually read them on the basis of their own classed, raced and gendered cultural experiences» (Ilieva 2000: 53). Reading is an interactive process, which depends not only on the formal features of the text itself (genre, structural complexity, lexical range and so on) but also on the ability of the reader to relate to or analyse those same features.

Coursebook writers (and teachers using coursebooks) should be aware that FL learners need to work at the level of meaning with a variety of different texts. 'Different' here in relation to texts can be seen in terms of a three-way distinction: the genre or form of the text, *i.e.* letters, articles, adverts, brochures, literary extracts, etc. (see Rivas 1999); the text type or function, *i.e.* narrative, descriptive, argumentative, instructive or expository (see Bloor 1998 and Jones 2002); and finally, the text topic, the socio-cultural content/categories in the text, *i.e.* identity, beliefs, behaviours, icons, geography, institutions, etc. (see Stern 1991 and Byram 1993). A comprehensive survey of text variety in Portuguese-produced ELT coursebooks for the third cycle of compulsory education in Portugal (Hurst 2014) produced quantitative data that reveals a low range of text variety across the three variables in the corpus of 12 coursebooks (see Table One below).

Table One

Text Variety in Portuguese-Produced ELT Coursebooks

Hurst (2014) Coursebook Corpus: Texts for Reading						
Coursebook Series	Content of texts		Type of Texts		Form of texts	
<i>Active English</i> [1981-82] (36 texts)	Behaviour	77.8%	Descriptive	61.1%	Class texts	33.3%
	Geography	13.9%	Narrative	22.2%	Letters	33.3%
<i>Passport</i> [1987-89] (111 texts)	Behaviour	46.8%	Descriptive	44.1%	Class texts	47.7%
	Geography	21.6%	Expository	37.8%	Leaflets	7.2%
<i>Aerial</i> [1998-2000] (68 texts)	Behaviour	67.7%	Descriptive	69.1%	Class texts	67.6%
	Geography	13.2%	Narrative	13.2%	Letters	11.8%
<i>Extreme</i> [2004-06] (85 texts)	Behaviour	65.9%	Descriptive	62.4%	Class texts	42.4%
	Identity	10.6%	Expository	17.6%	Quiz	11.8%

This survey was deliberately historically located to avoid potential conflicts of interest (economic and/or ethical) with respect to the authors and publishers of the coursebooks in the corpus. However, an ‘ad hoc’ survey of more recent Portuguese-produced ELT coursebooks for the 7th grade (e.g. ‘Spotlight’ 2010, ‘New Getting On’ 2011 and ‘New Wave’, 2011) reveals that while coursebook writers no longer rely so heavily on non-authentic (self-penned?) ‘class texts’ and have shifted their reliance to internet sourced texts, there remains a distinct lack of concern with the provision of multiple and varied text forms and types (as defined above) and also very little movement away from ‘traditional’ approaches to post-reading activities, such as, so-called, reading comprehension questions. Language work (vocabulary or grammar) remains the predominant focus and learners have very few opportunities to construct (and share) their own perspectives on the meaning of the text. Language work should be the means to the end of understanding the text, which includes «understanding the main idea of the text, interpreting the text, relating the text to its context and the outside world, making judgments about the text, evaluating and synthesising the text and so on» (Alderson & Lukmani 1989: 269).

The language and content of the texts themselves limit and shape the kind of reaction/interpretation a learner may construct, a fact which is most definitely true of the traditional kind of ‘comprehension questions’, where learners often are obliged to reproduce what the text states (more or less exactly) in order to confirm the unique

‘correct’ answer. This approach pays little heed to the notion that reading should be a matter of both accessing and adding meaning through individual reinterpretation: «In the classroom, however, this tends not to happen: learners are typically required to respond with ‘correct’ responses to classroom texts, whose forms and meanings remain fixed, unyielding to new inflections or resonances» (Wallace 2006: 75). Reading comprehension needs to be goal-driven dealing with text content at multiple levels; learners should be required to make connections to new perspectives and new knowledge through reading comprehension tasks that repeatedly challenge them to think critically (Kern 2008). Further variety could be introduced by moving away from post-reading activities that are always to do with writing or speaking: «oral or written responses are fine, but we also need to offer students alternative modes of response – including sketching, dramatizing, singing and ‘hands-on activities, such as creating projects» (McLaughlin 2012: 437).

In general, ELT professionals should be concerned that the generalised, current (‘traditional’) approach to reading in ELT course books reveals that learners have little or no control over the way they interact with texts as readers; there is an accepted pedagogical framework which governs coursebook structure which is entirely teacher-centred. Also, learners are usually not encouraged to make any personal connection with the text until after all the ‘language work’ has been taken care of, they are not required to relate the text to their previous knowledge or experiences or if they are, the text has already been ‘worked to death’ and they are no longer motivated to react and respond: this approach is too abstract. In addition, much of the so-called ‘comprehension work’ assumes that there is an inherent, unique, ‘correct’ meaning to the text that exists beyond the reader: this approach is too limiting. Learners end up ‘fishing’ in the text for the pre-destined answers and are even often encouraged to cite exact words or phrases from the text to show that they have ‘landed’ the correct answer. This approach does not allow for any kind of counterpoint or friction with the text, learners simply confirmed the authorised viewpoint. Moreover, here, the opportunity to explore intercultural perspectives is also excluded: the learner-reader’s assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and values are not brought into consideration. The lack of tasks which require the interpretation, negotiation and creation of meaning excludes an educational perspective informed by intercultural objectives (Gonçalves Matos 2014).

Coursebooks should provide a wide range/variety of texts in current English; this is an elemental pre-requisite of developing the learners' awareness of the different structures, styles and purposes that can be discerned in written texts. Developing this awareness will naturally involve some language work but this should be subsequent to an initial reaction at the level of meaning. This suggestion can be viewed as a kind of process approach, as often nowadays occurs in developing writing skills, whereby there can be a first draft (reaction), further input, a review and a final draft (response); learners need to improve their language level in order to facilitate their reading ability but this need should be integrated into different tasks rather than given an unnatural (non-real world) emphasis. Learners need to read for different purposes, with different final 'products' in mind, which involves them in the use of different reading strategies. Text-discourse relations need to be explored to see how semiotic resources are used together in specific socio-cultural, historical and institutional contexts to create meanings (van Leeuwen 2005).

The kind of texts that learners are confronted with, as mentioned above, is usually beyond the control of the learner. There should be 'space' in the teaching-learning process for learners to have some choice, so that they can read for themselves and not for their teacher. The variety of reading resources available nowadays, both digital and print, should be made use of to provide learning opportunities based on individual needs and interests (Erlina *et al* 2016). The whole genre of 'Young Adult Literature' deserves to be explored more fully in an attempt to provide texts which relate to learners' interests. In recent years, there have been hugely successful books within this genre, such as *The Hunger Games*, the *Twilight* series or even *Lord of the Rings* or the *Harry Potter* series. In his classic article on reading, Williams states: «In the absence of interesting texts, very little is possible» (1986: 42). There is a more than obvious connection between 'text topic' and learner motivation and participation in reading activities. Learners should be confronted with texts that provoke some kind of positive, emotional response; there is increasing evidence that this is significant factor in teaching-learning, as Masuhara (2003: 351) notes: «Neuroscience (*i.e.* the study of the central nervous systems – the study of the brain) provides evidence [...] that emotion [...] casts a fundamental and powerful influence on cognition, learning and memory».

The most 'traditional' kind of post-reading activities (reading comprehension questions or true/false questions) may be related to the meaning of the text but rarely challenge the learners beyond using lower order thinking skills (recognition and recall) and

learners become quite adept at ‘matching’ the questions to excerpts from the text. However, a real ‘focus on meaning’ would encourage learners to give individual responses to the text. There should be opportunities in the post-reading phase to evaluate, to appreciate, to debate and so on: to use higher order thinking skills. Minimally, good readers should be able to: «identify main ideas and details; distinguish between facts and opinions; draw inferences; determine author intent, stance and bias; summarize; synthesize two or more reading passages; and extend textual information to new tasks...» (Stoller *et al* 2013: 3) Naturally, this would imply having texts which present something new to the learners that they can then ‘test’ against their existing knowledge: there should be a ‘generative’ aspect to the texts and/or tasks that goes beyond literal meaning and moves towards a more «thoughtful literacy» (Applegate, Quinn & Applegate 2002: 179). Too much time in the ELT classroom is devoted to dealing with what learners already know and not with creating new knowledge.

Given that “the textbook is one of the most enduring and familiar aspects of classroom life” (Boostrom, 2001: 241) and their centrality to most teachers’ approach to schooling, the lack of research that focusses specifically on theoretical aspects of ELT coursebook content, design and, particularly production is surprising. Improvements in the provision of training in FL didactics by Portuguese higher education establishments (Alarcão, 2010) may result in this situation changing. However, further progress is still required: to make sure that the coursebooks connect with the learners and also allow learners to reflect on what they read/see in the coursebooks. Portuguese produced ELT materials should engage local learners by exploring problems, contradictions and issues in relation to these learners’ real world and their actual life experiences (Canagarajah, 2005). Locally produced coursebooks should have a clear advantage in this respect, compared to coursebooks produced overseas for the global market, being able to include both the local and the global cultural perspectives: learning materials should reflect a pluricentric attitude to English as an international language (Jenkins, 2006). Portuguese coursebook writers have the obligation to make their materials responsive to the local culture, as well as the target or international culture making use of the learners existing knowledge and experiences (Shin *et al*, 2011). Learning implies the personalised construction of meaning(s) by individuals; these meanings are co-constructed by language and culture, the two being inseparable, intermeshed and interactive.

Coursebook writers (and the teachers who use the coursebooks) seem to have become very ‘fixed’ in their approach to reading texts and reading comprehension. Reading texts are generally used to transition to other language or skills focussed work (Stoller *et al* 2013). This approach needs to be re-formulated and informed by the general trends that have re-construed FL teaching in recent years as a learner-centred, inclusive process that requires the learners to be ‘engaged’ and ‘involved’; furthermore, the emphasis must always be on dealing with language as a social instrument for the creation of meaning:

reading can be like a field trip to the zoo. At the zoo everyone notices different things. And upon returning everyone talks about what he or she saw. [...] a collective intelligence or mind-set creates understanding of what happened through information exchange, as students share their personal experiences, and, perhaps, too through deliberation or debate, as people offer potentially contradictory information. (Jenkins *et al* 2013: 188)

Learners should respond to texts not only by exploring vocabulary, grammar and discourse relations with content (through language work and, latterly, a topic to talk about) but should also be given the chance to position themselves in relation to the potentially multiple, culturally-derived meanings that a text may generate. Our learner-readers must be given the opportunity to contribute to the construction of these meanings. A social constructivist approach to what reading entails should be more explicitly reflected in the materials that Portuguese learners of English are being asked to work with in their coursebooks; this naturally involves teachers in ‘stepping back’ from explaining or giving their interpretation and not occupying centre-stage. The teacher’s role is «to create experiences and environments that introduce, nurture, or extend students’ abilities to engage with a text» (McLaughlin 2012: 434). We, teachers, need to guide our learners to develop their critical awareness when reading and also train ourselves to be more critical of the way coursebooks select and employ the reading texts we use in our ELT classrooms.

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