

# Receptive skills with young learners

Costas Gabrielatos, *PROFILE Athens*

## Introduction

In this article I will argue for the benefits of receptive skills development (i.e. reading and listening) with children (seven to eleven) at beginner/elementary levels who are able to recognise words in print. I will then outline objectives and discuss text and task selection.

## Receptive skills development

My survey of EFL coursebooks, as well as my observations of lessons and discussions with teachers, indicate that courses for children at beginner/elementary levels usually concentrate on vocabulary and grammar teaching. Texts are normally used as vehicles for the presentation of new language, whereas systematic receptive skills development is reserved for intermediate levels. Teaching materials may involve some 'comprehension' tasks (usually questions), but this alone hardly seems to constitute systematic skills development.

True, texts can be used for the presentation of language items, but it is not helpful to equate all text-based lessons with language work (see also McDonough & Shaw, 1993: 103-105; Underwood, 1989: 23). The main objective of a receptive skills programme is not the teaching of more grammar and vocabulary, but the development of the learners' ability to understand and interpret texts using their existing language knowledge. Of course, receptive skills development can be combined with language input in the same lesson, but the procedures need to be staged in such a way that the 'language' component does not cancel out the 'skills' one. For example, explaining all unknown lexis before learners read or listen to a text will cancel out training in inferring the meaning of lexis in the text (see also Gabrielatos, 1995a).

## Rationale

### Avoiding later problems

When systematic receptive skills development starts at low intermediate levels, the learners' reading/ listening behaviour is usually problematic. This is hardly surprising, as learners are somehow thrown in at the deep end: they are asked to read or listen to much longer and more complex texts and perform novel tasks such as reading selectively, extracting the gist, locating specific information and disregarding or inferring true meaning of unknown lexis.

### Problematic Areas

Following is an outline of those problematic areas which can be avoided by systematic receptive skills development from an early stage on (adapted from Gabrielatos, 1995a & b).

*Learners read/listen for the words and not for the meaning.*

*Learners get easily discouraged by unknown lexis.*

*Learners do not make conscious use of their background knowledge and experience.*

The main source of these problems seems to be the habit of explaining all unknown lexis and/or translating texts. Research findings have suggested that 'children are very sensitive

observers of teacher behaviour patterns in the classroom' (Weinstein, 1989 in Williams & Burden, 1997: 98); therefore, teachers 'need to be aware ... that their words, their actions and their interactions form part of every individual learner's own construction of knowledge' (Williams & Burden, 1997: 53). Based on such observations, learners (being already awestricken by the amount of lexis there is to learn) may be led to reason along the following lines:

Since my teacher always goes to the trouble of explaining/translating all the words, then the meaning of the text is the combination of the meanings of the words. So, we cannot understand the text if we don't understand all the words.

What is more, if learners think that the meaning is strictly in the words, then they may not see the need to utilise their background knowledge (for a discussion of the role of background knowledge in comprehension see Brown & Yule, 1983a: 233-256; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1988: 75-81; Just & Carpenter, 1987: 170-176, 241-245).

*Learners do not read/listen selectively.*

The reason may lie in teachers' habit of asking questions which are not of equal importance (e.g. questions asking for main information in the same group with ones asking for minor/unnecessary details), or simply asking learners to show total comprehension at all times (e.g. always re-telling in detail stories presented in class). What can compound the problem is the use of reading aloud as a means of developing reading skills. I would like to clarify here that I don't think this technique is problematic *per se*, as it can help beginners understand the relation between spelling and sound. Nevertheless, its misuse or overuse can communicate the wrong idea about the nature of reading (see Gabrielatos, 1996).

*Learners read/listen in an unstructured way.*

*Learners find it difficult to locate clues to meaning.*

There is more to a text than words and structures; there are equally important and inter-related factors: type, layout and organisation. Awareness of the layout and organisation of different text-types can help readers extract information more effectively. To illustrate the point, let me use the metaphor of a 'mechanically challenged' and a mechanically minded driver examining a car engine: the first will be looking at a shapeless blob of metal unable to even consider where to start; the second will be recognising specific parts, functionally connected to each other. An experienced reader with limited time, for instance, will get the main points of a newspaper article reporting a crime, by reading the first and last paragraph.

Possible reasons for the last two problems are: experience of a limited type of texts (usually comic strips and 'dialogues'), lack of awareness of the nature and organisation of different text types, and use of short, (over) simplified texts only. As a result, learners cannot 'navigate' successfully through the text when reading (e.g. they only read from the beginning towards the end). Similarly, they may not break the text down into smaller, more manageable chunks to facilitate understanding, but depend on a rather vague global impression only, and may be unable to locate the place where clues to meaning are given.

*When listening, they have problems identifying familiar lexis.*

*During listening they may not take account of the phonological clues available.*

Possible reasons are: lack of systematic ear training in recognising individual sounds or clusters, stress patterns and tone of voice, and the practice of always giving learners the

text to read while listening (for examples of transcript-based work on listening, see Gabrielatos, 1995b, 1996).

### **Grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation**

Receptive skills training brings additional benefits. If learners are not intimidated by unknown lexis, and know how to find their way in a text, then discovery techniques (i.e. when the teacher provides learners with language 'data' and guides them to discover the 'rule') will be more successful and as a result grammar and vocabulary learning will be enhanced (see also Devine, 1988: 269-270). Similarly, awareness of features of connected speech, and ability to identify words in the stream of speech will help learners improve their pronunciation.

### **Characteristics of young learners**

It would be wise to avoid over-reliance on influential theories about the abilities and limitations of children in different age groups. Such practice can result in the formation of rigid preconceptions, which may not reflect the group of learners at hand; this in turn will limit the effectiveness of teaching. Relevant to our discussion is Piaget's theory of specific stages of intellectual development (Gross, 1996: 629-640; McNally, 1977: 12-55), which has been criticised for limitations regarding methodology, clarity and applicability (see for example Gross, 1996: 640-641; Shorrocks, 1991: 263-265; Williams & Burden, 1997: 22-24).

Experimental evidence indicates that 'children may not have radically different capacities from those of adults and in some ways, when they have appropriate experience, their performance can be superior'. (Shorrocks, 1991: 268). An example is the ease with which some children understand computer operation, which baffles quite a few adults. It seems more effective then to examine the abilities of each learner individually. A matter of central importance is that the learners' limited language knowledge is not mistaken for equally limited cognitive abilities (Eysenck & Keane, 1995: 362; see also Holt, 1982: 189).

Fortunately, there seem to be some non-controversial characteristics which are relevant to our discussion (Brewster, 1991: 6-8; Scott & Ytreberg, 1990: 1-5; Williams, 1991: 207-210):

- Children can justify choices and opinions
- They need to be supported in their understanding of the propositional content of a message by moving from the concrete to the abstract
- Their attention span is limited. Therefore, tasks should be short, varied, motivating and interesting, and should offer 'concrete perceptual support' (Brewster, 1991: 6)

It would be helpful to keep in mind that 'training does produce improvement in performance which can be considerable, long-lasting and pervasive' (Meadows, 1988 in Gross, 1996: 641). Research suggests that 'even quite high level thinking and cognitive skills can be taught' (Shorrocks, 1991: 268; see also Gross, 1996: 640-641; Williams & Burden, 1997: 22-24).

During the first stages of receptive skills development the learners' reading/listening ability may initially deteriorate instead of improving; this does not necessarily indicate a problem with the method. A study on children's problem-solving (reported in Shorrocks, 1991: 269) showed an initial decline of performance before final improvement. The decline

was attributed to the children's experimenting with new strategies before finally mastering them.

### **Objectives**

#### **Identifying and using elements of context**

Learners should be able to use their knowledge of context (see Biber, 1988: 28-33; Brown & Yule, 1983a: 35-46) to understand the text. In addition they should be able to use available clues (title, visuals, key lexis etc.) to identify elements of context.

#### **Identifying elements of text**

Learners should be able to:

- recognise different text-types relevant to their experience (story, letter, advertisement, encyclopedic entry, article, radio news, etc.)
- identify possible sources of the text (magazine, newspaper, encyclopedia etc.)
- understand some types of organisation (time order, order of importance, from general to specific etc.), as well as the way this organisation is realised in the division of texts into sections
- understand the function of basic discourse markers (*and, or, but, [hen, etc.)*

#### **Identifying and using phonological clues**

Learners should be able to:

- recognise and distinguish between sounds which may sound similar to them (e.g. between long and short vowels)
  - be aware of the importance of stress for meaning and listen mainly for the stressed elements
  - be aware of and recognise the meaning carried by tone of voice
- (See also Brown, 1990: 59-60, 161-163).

#### **Identifying elements of content**

Learners should be able to:

- understand main ideas and facts
- identify specific information, stated explicitly and located in one place in the text
- recognise feelings (e.g. happiness, anger) and clear attitude (e.g. friendliness, hostility) using phonological/lexical clues

### **Text selection**

Texts which seem linguistically complex or long should not necessarily be rejected for use with low levels; the teacher can determine the difficulty of the lesson by manipulating the level of the task (see Nunan, 1989: 141-143, 196-198, 200-201). What is more, learners can cope better with a complex text if the topic is familiar to them (Anderson & Lynch, 1988: 49).

### **Length**

It would be beneficial if texts were longer than the ones used to present new language. Successfully tackling longer texts will boost the learners' confidence.

### Language and organisation

In order to present appropriate challenge, texts need to be more complex than 'presentation' ones in terms of language, speed of delivery, phonological features and organisation. Texts for native speakers of the same age may be too demanding, but at least simplified pedagogical texts should try to simulate them (for a discussion see Davies, 1988; Parker & Parker, 1991; Wallace, 1992: 76-81; Widdowson, 1978: 88-93). What is more, the learners' low linguistic level can be compensated by the use of strategies (for a discussion on the interaction between language competence and reading ability, see Alderson, 1984; Clarke, 1988; Devine, 1988; Eskey, 1988; Hudson, 1988).

#### Layout

It is important that texts mimic the layout of real-life text types and are accompanied by visual materials (see Anderson & Lynch, 1988: 58; Brown & Yule, 1983b: 85-86). Authentic-looking layout will help learners recognise different text types, and visuals will provide clear and helpful contextual support.

#### Content

Apart from the obvious fact that texts need to be relevant to the learners' age and interests there are other factors to consider:

- Content may be familiar so that learners can feel secure and utilise their background knowledge.
- Texts may offer new facts to learn; a process which simulates children's real-life experience.
- Content may be striking and/or fun to create interest and motivation.

### Task types

#### Creating expectations

These task types help learners approach texts actively. Learners:

- predict elements of context/content by using visuals, title, key lexis
- predict the continuation of a story.

#### Responding to open-ended questions

It is important that the question cannot be answered without real comprehension (e.g. merely through use of grammar/syntax).

#### Questions asking for facts

- Oral answer. According to the competence of individual learners the answer may be a sentence/phrase, key lexis, or even an LI response.
- Underline the answer in the text.
- Identify the section where clues can be found.

#### Questions asking for feelings/attitude

- Oral answer (key lexis or L1).
- Learners' use of facial expressions/gestures.
- Learners' choice of teacher's alternative facial expressions/gestures.

### Filling in grids

Learners complete grids with information about:

- people, animals, places or objects mentioned in the text(s)
- facts or feelings regarding characters involved in a story

Grids can be used flexibly to cater for mixed ability classes. Let us take the example of a number of small texts giving information about three different animals. Grid A is more challenging as it requires a linguistic response; Grid B is less challenging as learners respond with only ✓ or ✗.

#### GRID A

	COLOUR(S)	SIZE	FOOD ETC.
ANIMAL 1			
ANIMAL 2			
ANIMAL 3			

#### GRID B

	COLOUR ETC.			
	BROWN	WHITE	BLACK	GREY ETC.
ANIMAL 1				
ANIMAL 2				
ANIMAL 3				

### Following instructions

Learners use the instructions or clues offered in the text to:

- make a simple object (e.g. a paper hat)
- draw a shape, object, route on a map etc.
- add missing elements in a given picture
- solve a mathematical problem or a logic quiz (Phillips, 1993: 54-56).

### Key-lexis recognition

This type of task aims to reinforce selective reading/listening:

- Learners are asked to indicate the lexical items they think are more important by underlining when reading, or tapping on their desks when listening (see also *A note on feedback*)
- The teacher tells a short story in which some of the original key words have been replaced by ones which do not make sense in the context; learners have to identify those words (adapted from Brewster, 1991: 168).

### Choosing

Here learners are not asked to respond using language or gestures, but to select among given options. The most common task types are *Multiple choice*, *True/false* and *Odd one out*. Difficulty can be manipulated by changing the number of options given. It is important that the incorrect options are not distracting, and that the choice of the correct option clearly indicates comprehension, or hints at the nature of the learners' problems. (For a general discussion and examples see Nuttall, 1996: 194-200.) Options can be:

- sentences, phrases or lexis expressing facts or feelings/attitude
- visuals depicting shapes, objects, animals, people, facts, feelings, attitude
- alternative titles, text-types, sources of texts, or contextual elements
- words exemplifying different sounds or stress patterns.

### Matching

Learners are given one or more texts and asked to match:

- ingredients to recipes (Phillips, 1993: 60-62)
- feelings/attitude to characters
- objects/animals to their owners etc.
- texts to text-types
- words in the text to other given words, according to specific sounds (ear training).

### Re-ordering and sequencing

This type is suited to raising and/or checking awareness of text organisation. Learners can be given:

- jumbled sentences/paragraphs to create a text
- visuals depicting a story to put in order before and/or while reading or listening to the story.

### Counting and repeating

*Elements of content/context*: learners are helped to read/listen selectively.

- Learners count the people, animals, objects or places mentioned.

*Phonological aspects*-, learners see that words are not always pronounced clearly and that they are usually 'squashed' into each other (adapted from Ur, 1984: 42-43).

- Play (or say) a short phrase and ask learners to count how many words they have heard.
- Stop the tape and ask learners to repeat the last phrase. First ask for the phrase in 'ideal' form (i.e. pronounced very clearly), then ask them to repeat it as it was pronounced by the speaker.

### A note on feedback

During feedback there needs to be constant reference to the text. This may seem difficult with listening texts, but there are techniques which make it possible.

- *Teacher as cassette recorder* (adapted from Phillips, 1993: 34-35): learners can ask the teacher to 'stop', 'rewind' or 'fast forward' so that they gain time to think, or listen again to specific parts.
- *Tapping*: learners tap their pens on the desk when they hear the information needed or helpful clues; the tape is stopped and learners discuss clues and strategies. In case of disagreement the problematic section can be repeated.

Such techniques do not only hand the control over to the learners, but also give the teacher helpful insights into the learners' abilities and problems (see also Underwood, 1989: 17).

Since the main aim of reading/listening lessons is skills development (not language input/practice), learner responses which demonstrate comprehension and use of effective strategies should be considered satisfactory even if they are not accurate. For example, during ear training the objective is accurate perception of sounds, stress and intonation, not their production. There may be cases when even LI responses are deemed acceptable. Only providing the correct 'answer' for them will not be of much help to learners. It would be unreasonable to expect that learners (of any age) will automatically pinpoint problems and perform the abstractions needed in order to draw conclusions. In order to become aware of and adopt/develop appropriate strategies learners need 'tangible' clues and guidance. The main objective of feedback is elicitation of the source of problems, as well as the strategies used, and then provision of guidance in the form of tips and examples (see also Rost, 1990: 153-156; Shorrocks, 1991: 270-272; Williams & Burden, 1997: 49-51 & 73).

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