

What is 'Too Difficult' for young learners of English to understand?

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Abstract

The debate about appropriate methodology most often concerns itself with the importance of avoiding methodology which is appropriate for BANA countries being uncritically exported to TESEP countries. Is it not equally important, though, that TESEP practitioners should be encouraged to consider BANA approaches and methods in a spirit of open critical debate? Achieving methodological appropriacy is as much, on the TESEP side, about exploring and evaluating different ways of doing things, as about cross-cultural sensitivity and knowledge on the BANA side.

This article was stimulated by debates and discussions about *difficulty* with teachers of English to Primary School children, during courses at the University of Warwick, and with the same sort of teachers on seminars in their own countries. Two recent, British Council sponsored, groups at Warwick University were from France and Spain, and I have drawn on the reactions from these groups extensively. My article offers no conclusive answers, but aims to open a debate on teachers' own attitudes to what language learning by young children is all about, especially in the area of reading comprehension.

Les débats sur la méthodologie appropriée reviennent le plus souvent à souligner qu'il est important d'éviter que la méthodologie adaptée aux pays BANA soit exportée telle quelle dans les pays TESEP. N'est-il pas tout aussi important d'encourager les utilisateurs TESEP à aborder les démarches et les méthodes BANA avec du recul et dans un esprit ouvert? La mise au point d'une méthodologie appropriée consiste autant du côté TESEP, à rechercher et à évaluer différentes façons de faire que, du côté BANA, à faire preuve de sensibilité et de connaissances interculturelles.

Cet article a été inspiré par les débats et les discussions sur la notion de difficulté avec des professeurs d'anglais à l'école primaire au cours de stages à l'université de Warwick et pendant des séminaires dans leurs pays. Les deux derniers groupes de stagiaires de l'université de Warwick, venus sous l'égide du British Council, étaient originaires de France et d'Espagne et j'ai longuement commenté leurs réactions. Mon article n'apporte aucune réponse définitive mais cherche à ouvrir un débat sur les attitudes des professeurs à l'égard de l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère, notamment dans le domaine de la compréhension écrite.

What follows is a short passage plus pictures that (purely to save copyright difficulties) I have constructed myself, as an adaptation of a traditional tale. In an easier copyright climate, I might have chosen a fully authentic text, such as those covered in Ellis and Brewster (see references below). but since my hobby is to write stories for children, perhaps this one can be accepted as an example of real English which may offer some 'difficulties' for foreign language learners. This is followed by a short questionnaire. If any readers are willing to send me their responses at the address at the end, I should be more than grateful. Otherwise, you may use it to aid your own reflections on this subject. Please read and react before you look at the rest of this article.

Cynical note:

I am aware that since I cannot control the way you read this article, your responses may possibly be 'contaminated' by some of the comments I make later. Human nature will probably lead you now to skip ahead, see what I think, and then react negatively or positively to that, rather than purely to my passage and its accompanying questionnaire. If so, good. It means that you are not the sort of linear 'word-by-word' reader that I have described below. You have your own agenda, and you will read the article accordingly. I will not, therefore, be able to use your responses as anything other than an indication of your views, but it would be a nice way of making contact anyway!

The Passage

The Five Blind Scientists and the Elephant (see picture overleaf)

This is an old story. Perhaps you know it.

Once upon a time there was a special town. Everyone in that town was blind. They could not see. One day, an elephant came into the town and stood in the market square.

'Phhhheooww!' said the elephant.

'What's this?' said the people. 'What is this strange animal in our square?'

They could hear the elephant (Pehhhoww!!) and they could smell the elephant (Pooh! It smelled terrible) but they could not see it.

Five famous scientists from the town came to the square.

'What is this animal? What is it like?', they said. 'Let's feel it, and find out.'

So they felt the elephant. 'Hmmm It's very big, but what is it really like?'

The first scientist felt its tail. It was long and thin.
 'Hmm. This animal is like a snake.'
 The second scientist felt its body. It was hard. 'Hmm. This animal is like a wall.'
 The third scientist felt one of its legs. It was big and hard and round.
 'Hmmm. This animal is like a tree.'
 The fourth scientist felt one of its ears. It was big and wide and rough and hard.
 'Hmm. This animal is like a carpet.'
 The fifth scientist felt one of its tusks. It was long and smooth and sharp.
 'Hmm. This animal is like a knife or a sword.'
 They didn't listen to each other. They argued. They didn't agree.
 'It's like a sword! No it's not! It's like a tree! A carpet! A snake! A wall! No it's not! Yes it is!' They shouted and shouted, but they didn't listen to each other.
 In the end, the elephant went away. It was very angry.
 'What stupid people!' it said 'O.K they can't see me, but they can listen to each other. I'm not like a carpet, a knife, a wall, a snake, a tree. I am a wonderful and complicated animal. I am an elephant! Pheowooohh!'

Questionnaire

Imagine that this passage is under consideration by you for inclusion in a course for 9 to 10 year old pupils who have had one or two years' previous experience of English in school. What are your reactions to it?

1. Is it:
 - a) too difficult,
 - b) challenging but possible, or
 - c) quite possible for your students?

2. If a) 'too difficult', what criteria do you base this decision on? Please list all the factors that you think are important. You might for example be worried that the story is in the past tense.

 If b) 'challenging but possible', or c) 'quite possible' please say how you would help your pupils to get the most from it. E.g. you might suggest using visuals to accompany the passage

3. For what purpose(s) would you use this passage? E.g. you might suggest using it to train students to get the important information

from a passage, or to teach or reinforce the past tense. These are two very different types of purpose, however. A third type of purpose would simply be to give the pupils an experience of enjoying what they read.

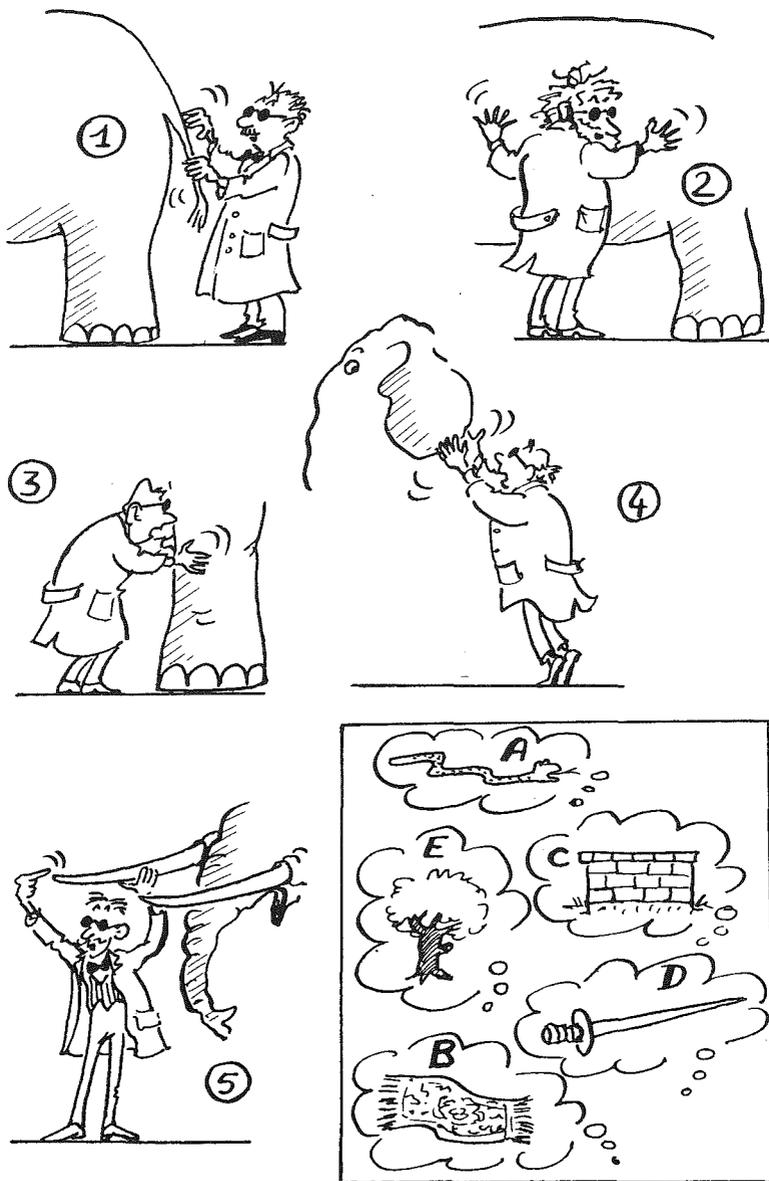
Discussion

There are of course no 'right answers' to the above questions, but some expected ones, and the next part of the article may help you to reflect on your own attitudes to reading comprehension for younger learners, using the above example as a concrete focus for discussion.

The reactions to passages like this from groups of teachers from different backgrounds have been mixed, but the reactions from homogeneous groups of teachers have tended to be fairly consistent within the group, but varied from group to group. The degree of optimism that such texts could be 'coped with' usefully by the children has varied widely, as have the notions of what 'coping with usefully' might mean. Purely anecdotally, I would say that French teachers have been the least optimistic, and that Spanish and Italian teachers from similar contexts have tended to be much more optimistic.

Of course, age of pupils is not the only factor. Different countries currently have different syllabus aims and allocate different amounts of time per week to teaching English. However, the aims and syllabus provision of countries such as France, Spain and Italy are broadly similar. The intention in these countries is eventually to have children starting English at age 7 or 8, with from 2 to 3 hours a week, so that by the age of 9 or 10 they should no longer be considered 'beginners'. Why the difference in attitude?

Much of what I will say next has already been the subject of debate and discussion over the past 15 years in the more 'mainstream' and established field of teaching reading in English as a foreign language to adults. I am not at all equating children's learning with adults' learning, but I feel that there are two important reasons for rehearsing these points from the mainstream debate in an article destined for primary school teachers. Firstly, many new primary school teachers of English have not been exposed at all to this debate, since they have so far been general subject teachers rather than specialised language teachers. It may therefore be useful to them to know that there has been a debate, and to have some references to books and articles that will enable them to 'tune in' to it, and thus be equipped to join in with it at the stage that it has reached. Secondly, it



Drawings by H.H. Carlier

is my feeling that many of the problems that teachers encounter in attitudes to reading in their older students, have their roots in experiences that those students have had in school. For example, even at Post Graduate level in the courses in English for Academic Purposes that we offer to non-native speakers of English at Warwick University, we often find ourselves trying to undo a number of unprofitable approaches in these students. Examples are a tendency to read word by word, to panic at any unfamiliar word or expression, and to fail to 'see the wood for the trees', that is, to fail to distinguish what is vital in a text from what is merely supporting or incidental detail. Now that there is a widespread shift towards introducing English at a much earlier age, in primary school in many countries, it would be sad merely to shift the establishment of these unhelpful attitudes to an earlier stage in pupil's development.

Focus on language content versus focus on training skills of reading comprehension

In the title, I used the phrase 'Too Difficult' because that is the one that I have heard most often from many teachers. However, the words 'difficult' and 'difficulty' suggest a block that lies mostly within the language of the text itself and may be perceived by some teachers to be absolute. Some teachers have a very proper concern for the total linguistic content of a text in itself. 'Difficult items' are seen as anything 'new' or unfamiliar because not already met in other parts of a course, such as vocabulary or structures. The predominant strategy for assessing 'difficulty' or 'challenge' would be a count of such items, and an estimate of the proportion of unfamiliar to 'known'. There is much good sense in this, but if carried too far, it leads to an approach that cuts off the potential that a challenging, but not 'impossible' text offers for language skills, growth and learning.

The word 'challenge' (used in question 1), on the other hand, suggests something that is not easy but that can be overcome, given outside support and encouragement, in addition to the learner's own hopeful attitude to the outcome. It also suggests something that it is worth overcoming because it leads to personal growth and a sense of achievement. Teachers who chose a), b) or c) answer to question 1 will probably be looking more at the combination of what the passage offers and of what they themselves can do in class to make it

possible for the pupils to 'crack the problem'. They will probably be looking at the passage as a way of training Reading Skills rather than as direct input to 'learning more language items' for productive use.

There are many sources of support that are available not only 'outside' but also alongside the text. Illustrations and use of previous knowledge of the topic area, are two examples. Some pupils may be aware of the traditional story, in the case of the text proposed. There may also be sources of support within a text, such as reformulation or 'glossing' of new terms (e.g. in the elephant story 'blind' might be a new word, but it is glossed in the text twice as meaning 'not able to see', and 'see' is a word that we might expect any second or third year pupil to know well). Inferences may also be drawn from language that is understood from the context (e.g. the structure 'It's like a ' may not have been previously met, but the context makes the meaning clear. Many coursebooks also introduce the related structure 'What is he/she like?' at an early stage, as an invitation to give a description).

The nature of what the pupils are actually asked to achieve as a result of what they read, is an important dimension of teachers' perception of challenge/difficulty. Teachers with a very strong orientation to the language content of texts often have a view that the children must be able to process, extract and manipulate each and every item found within it. If the text offers too many complexities and unfamiliarities from that point of view, it tends to be rejected. An opposing view is that texts for reading are there to be read and understood, that is for the key or salient information or, in this case 'point' of the story to be appreciated. They are not mere 'quarries' for language items to be collected and exercised. The pupils may indeed not be able to manipulate all the 'new' language in a passage, but if they react to it appropriately, they may be assumed to have processed the meaning, and thus have 'done well'. The language-dominated type of teacher worries about the fact that pupils could not immediately reproduce everything that they have just seen on the page, and does not rejoice in the fact that they have nonetheless been rendered able to understand it.

Training of pupils to be hopeful and robust in the face of a challenge, and to develop and use strategies to deal with 'difficulty' is very much the teacher's responsibility. These are the factors that I would emphasise as useful in this regard:

Creation of a 'transparent' context

Pre-Reading preparation

It is the teacher's responsibility to create or increase 'transparency' of the context in which the words are set by proper preparation and introduction. If the passage is about elephants, say so, show pictures, and elicit both ideas in the native language, and words and phrases in English that might 'feed' the topic. Ask them to try to describe an elephant in English. Responses might include 'grey', 'big', 'biggest land animal', 'Africa' or 'India' in English. The 'feel objects in a bag' game, which involves trying to guess the identity of small objects hidden in a bag by putting your hand inside it, could be another way into this story. It foreshadows the difficulties of doing without your eyes, and may help students to guess the meaning of 'blind' more readily.

Assistance with 'difficulties' found within a text

It is the teacher's responsibility to enhance the possibility of working out the meanings of some parts of the language in the text from information given in the rest. E.g. if 'blind' is a new word but 'see' and 'feel' are known words, the connection should be made clear, and the pupils should be encouraged to guess, rather than being given a translation as the first reaction.

A realistic approach to what demonstrating reading comprehension involves

Research has shown that 'good' readers in their native language tend to retain the important information. This information is retained in its content form, not verbatim. Therefore, expecting learners to reproduce whole phrases or sentences from a passage as a way of combining 'language practice' with demonstration of comprehension is a dangerous trap. Firstly, it leads the teacher to ask questions about insignificant detail, as well as about main points, just in order to elicit the 'language', and thus obscures the different degrees of importance that items of information have in a passage. Even more dangerously, it can lead to the impression that texts in English are there just to collect language items from and practise them rather than for enjoyment or learning new things about the world.

So far, I have put my case very strongly. Now for some modifications that keep us on the road to a commonsense approach both to suitable linguistic content of texts and useful exploitation of them for language progress as well

as training in reading skills.

By criticising a heavily language-item based approach to judging whether a text is 'too difficult' or not, I do not intend to repeat the worst excesses of the early enthusiasms of some proponents of authentic texts. There the attitude was 'use what you like, and grade the task not the text'. This has led, in some cases, to texts way beyond students' present knowledge being used with some entirely trivial tasks. This is a waste both of the text, and of the tasks. An example for this text would be to ask the pupils only 'What was the animal?' 'How many scientists felt it?' There is a middle way. My constructed text and its accompanying visuals was an attempt to provide support from the visuals to the text and activities that involved getting the important points, and leading to further activities that the children will see the point of (an enjoyable dramatisation, rather than 10 grammar questions about the story).

There is also, a case for utilising items from reading passages as data for later productive language use by the pupils. Well-designed comprehension materials are 'cost-effective' That is, they are also usable to introduce useful items which can be picked up and reused in later lessons, for grammar or vocabulary work if you wish, by reference back to the text, which by now has been successfully understood in its essence. The operative word is 'later'. I would personally avoid mixing the two aims too much in the same lesson.

So here is my full plan for some lessons involving this text. It's not THE answer, just an indication of how a teacher who is approaching the question of difficulty from a number of directions goes about her work.

First lesson

1. Play the 'feel in the bag' game or ask students to close their eyes and touch different objects and try to identify them. If they have already covered adjective like 'smooth, rough, hard, soft' elicit these too.
2. Draw an elephant on the board. Point to the body, tail, legs, ears, and tusks. Ask for these words in English. Write any that are correctly given on the board next to the picture. Do not supply the words that are not known, because they will be met in the text itself, and can be used for training guessing from context.
3. Read aloud and enact the story to the children. Cover your eyes on the word 'blind' and dramatically 'feel' the parts of the elephant on the board.

4. Give them the text and the task to read privately, and let them attempt the matching task. Let them check their answers in pairs and circulate to help them.
5. Elect an 'elephant' and the five scientists for dramatisation. Act as narrator of the story, using the text, while they act out the scientists' attempts. If the students are enthusiastic, let them work out their own words for a dramatisation that involves words from the story, and do it again.

A Later Lesson

Tell the story again, and this time focus on the language of the story, revising or introducing for productive use the language connected with the senses.

Give a picture of an elephant to label the parts of the body important in the story. You might also add, and teach 'trunk'.

Ask 'Did the blind men SEE/HEAR/SMELL/FEEL/TASTE the elephant?'

Possible extension of use of the 'sense verbs' in English when applied to the thing perceived, e.g.

What does an elephant LOOK LIKE? (big, grey, fat etc.)
 SOUND LIKE? (they make the noises)
 SMELL LIKE (Pooh! Horrid! Strong!)
 FEEL LIKE? (Rough, hard)
 TASTE LIKE (play this for humour. Who wants
 to taste an elephant? Not me!)

Extension to other objects, e.g. What does a lemon feel/smell/taste like?
 a violin feel/sound like?

A Later Science Lesson in the Native Language with an Extension in English

Discussion in the native language of the importance of using all the evidence and listening to other people's ideas. Extension of this idea into a game in the native language 'What am I thinking of?' Leader thinks of an animal, an item of food, or an object and the class has 10 chances to ask YES/NO questions to narrow down and find out what it is. They must at first ask strategic questions,

e.g. 'Is it hard/soft/sweet/dangerous/ made of metal?' rather than detailed 'one-off' questions such as 'Is it a dog?' and listen to each other's questions and the answers. If they do not, you can say;

'You are just like the five blind scientists! Please listen to each other!'

Once the idea is established, play the game in English.

Note that the language item 'each other' (which in many courses is considered to be 'difficult') is at no point exercised for productive use, but that in the context of the reading passage and in the context of the comments on the '10 questions' game it should be readily understood. The story was in the past tense, because most stories are, but again the pupils were required only to process it and not to concentrate on its linguistic form.

Perhaps the chosen text and its extensions were flawed from the point of view of your situation. Perhaps you think that it was indeed 'too difficult'. I can only say that I have used such texts myself with some success with children of the 9 to 10 year-old age-group. Articulating to yourself (and perhaps in your replies to me) why it might or might not work for you could be a useful way of helping both you and me to think about the issues involved. I promise to respond.

Please send responses to:

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Useful References for Further Reading:

Donaldson, M. (1978), *Children's Minds*, Fontana Press

This book is concerned with children's language and conceptual development in the native language, and how schooling can assist or block full development in both modes, but full of insights that apply to the attitudes of young children to language in general.

Ellis, G and Brewster J, (1991) *The Primary Teachers' Story telling handbook*, Penguin

This book shows how a selection of authentic children's story and picture books can be used to teach the foreign language. The focus is on Story Telling, but the use of the texts to be seen on the page is also covered, and there is a very useful and commonsense guide to analysing the linguistic content of these texts.

Halliwell, S. (1992) *Teaching English in the Primary Classroom*, Longman
A mature and sophisticated yet practical set of insights into methodology for young learners of English as a foreign language.

Widdowson, H.G. (1978) *Teaching Language as Communication*, Oxford University Press

This book is a major source of advice about using texts for comprehension rather than distorting them as mere excuses for language exercises.

The Author

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