ASIAN EFL JOURNAL
The EFL Professional's Written Forum

ISSN: 1738-1460

Volume 9. Issue 4
Article 17

Title

Helping Daunted Low Level Adult EFL Learners Get a Fresh Start with a Literature Ladder

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Abstract

This paper explores the pedagogical changes Taiwanese EFL students have undergone over the last decade and a half, identifies one group (a small portion of college students who have thus far failed to attain the skills needed for basic reading tasks), and offers a goal for the members of this group: to become autonomous learners. The paper then proposes Krashen's (2004) literature based extensive reading model as a tool to help them attain the goal but notes that lower level students will have to overcome two challenges. First, lower level students cannot engage the material at the first rung of Krashen's model--graded readers--due to lexical difficulties: Because the passages in graded readers are much longer than typical EFL books, students who experience low lexical sight automaticity forget what they are reading by the time they reach the end of the paragraph.

To help them improve their automaticity and thus their reading speed, the paper proposes using Anderson's (2002) rate build up reading technique, an adaptation of Samuels' Repeated

Reading (RR) application (1979) and the i minus 1 hypothesis (Day & Bamford, 1998), as a prestage to Krashen's model to create a combined extensive reading ladder. Secondly, despite the surfeit of research espousing the benefits of extensive reading and the motivational advantages of using literature in the classroom, simply providing literature as reading material does not automatically guarantee low level students' interest either in the classroom or once they leave. Thus, teaching should be carefully organized both at the course level and in the presentation of the material so that students can enjoy and profit from the work both during the course and once they leave. To illustrate how each area can be addressed simultaneously, the paper outlines Krashen's contribution and then offers a classroom model that illustrates the use of the RBU procedure and a cyclical application of three skills areas: language based, literature for content, and literature for personal enrichment.

Key words: Low-level, autonomous learning, literature, graded readers, lexical automacity, reading speed

1. Introduction

From Taiwan's first annual TESOL conference to the Ministry of Education's decision to lower the age of mandated English learning instruction to the first grade (Nunan, 2003), theorists and pedagogists, myself included, with the best intentions of course, have participated in the island's annual conferences. A decade and a half later, the Protean Generation--EFL students who have undergone and had to adjust to the gamut of educational trial and error which has resulted from our advice--is attending college. Some, despite the incessant pedagogic changes we have put them through, have succeeded. Others, regardless of our best intentions, have slipped through the cracks. Nevertheless, we, theorists and pedagogists, marching on hand in hand, continue to offer more suggestions.

The question is what do we do about this aging group: Do we forget about them, mark them as acceptable losses, and focus on our newest young arrivals, or do we attempt one last fresh start? The latter seems the more responsible course. While our time with these adult learners is at an end, theirs is not: The recent island wide General English Proficiency Test (the bench mark for many public and private sector jobs), helping their own children who will one day be attending school, and countless other English demands loom in the distance. These soon to be graduates do not have another decade or so to get it right, but we can do what we arguably should have done in the beginning: Help them to become autonomous learners, learners who have "acquired enough of the second language so that at least some authentic input is comprehensible, enough to ensure . . . the ability to acquire still more language" (Krashen, 2004, p. 9) and enough skills to continue to engage materials outside of the classroom in a meaningful and enjoyable way in order to continue to progress on their own.

One answer to helping these students begin a track towards life long autonomous leaning may be putting them in control of their learning by setting them on a path up a ladder model which is based on reading literary materials. To fully understand the ladder, we must examine the first part of it, Stephen Krashen's contribution. Krashen, speaking to the island's educators at the 2004 TESOL conference, presented a paper, *Applying the Comprehension Hypothesis: Some Suggestions,* and offered what appears to be a

commonsensical gradation of reading materials for "elementary school all the way to the university level" (p. 13). The model, which avoids the heated debate about what place graded readers and other nontraditional reading materials hold in the field of literature (see Day & Bamford, 1998), begins with the introduction of graded readers--"extended simplified versions of classics, modern novels, fairy tales, and simple originals, mostly fiction, written in language reduced terms of structures and vocabulary" (Hill, 1997, p. 57)--and continues through a series of steps: light reading, popular literature, contemporary serious literature, the classics, and comparative literature (table 1).

Table 1: Krashen's Comprehension Reading Model

Level 1: Graded Readers

Stage 1 includes reading very easy texts such as graded readers, language experience texts (stories dictated by student to teacher; teacher writes out the story), and newspapers written for EFL students. The only criterion for texts is that they be compelling. They need not provide cultural information or "make you a better person." Some reading can be done as sustained silent reading as students become independent readers.

Level 2: Light Reading

The focus of level 2 is "light" authentic reading, that is comics, graphic novels, and easy sections of newspapers, with continuing reading of graded readers and books especially adapted for second language acquirers.

Class discussion includes the cultural background of some assigned readings as well as readings done in small groups (literature circles).

Background readings are provided in the first language when appropriate, e.g. comparison to similar genres in the first language.

Class activities also include teachers reading to the class from level 2 reading material as a means of providing additional comprehensible input and stimulating interest in books.

Sustained silent reading (SSR) is provided about ten minutes per day. Students can read anything they like (within reason), including graded readers and other reading material from level 1. They are not "accountable" for what they read during SSR.

Some orientation can be done at this level in the students' first language. This will consist of a brief introduction to age acquisition theory or "how language is acquired," illustrated by case histories of successful and unsuccessful second language acquisition.

The formal study of grammar can begin here with a focus on aspects of grammar that are useful for editing. Instruction will also include the use of a grammar handbook and the spell-check function on a computer.

Level 3: Popular Literature

Reading at level 3 focuses on contemporary and light popular literature, including some current best sellers, popular magazines, and viewing of "lighter" films.

Class discussion focuses on current culture and how values are expressed in current popular literature, e.g. gender roles, humor, how films and novels comment on issues of the day, the role of "gossip" magazines and newspapers, etc.

SSR continues, again allowing students to select their own reading, which can include reading at "lower levels."

Grammar study at this level can expand to include some "linguistics," i.e. language universals and language change.

I predict that many students will be "autonomous" by this time, able to understand a considerable amount of input outside the classroom.

Level 4: Contemporary Serious Literature

This level includes the heavier and more "serious" works of current interest published in English, as well as films, newspapers, and literary and philosophical magazines.

The approach will at first be "narrow," focusing on the work of one author or genre, e.g. the works of Kurt Vonnegut, plays by Neil Simon.

As before, SSR can include lighter reading. Only after students have experienced several authors or genres in depth will the "survey" be done.

This level, and the next, can he repeated several times, focusing on different authors and genres.

At this stage, language acquisition theory can be done in some detail, reading original works in English.

Level 5: The Classics

Students are now ready for "the classics," literature written in very different eras.

To help ensure comprehensibility, the approach will he "narrow," with a focus on one author or one genre, e.g., the romance, the historical novel of a certain period (e.g., World War I, the Depression).

Background readings in English and in the first language will also help increase comprehensibility.

Level 6: Comparative Literature

Comparative literature emphasizes universals: universal themes, universal plots, universal characters, universals of morality and ethics.

For the latest generation of youngsters just entering the educational system, Krashen's steps compose a potentially sound plan, but in a world where the latest panacea has come much too late for our aging Protean Generation things are not that simple. Not only are these older learners daunted from a series of unsuccessful educational experiences, they have trouble fully engaging the material at the first rung of the Krashen's model--graded readers--for two reasons. First, because the longer nature of these texts--much longer than the passages these students have typically encountered in EFL course books--has created an extra challenge: Graded readers, even those at the lowest level, 200 words, are beyond the ability of many low level EFL learners. The problem is not a matter of lexical knowledge: Students may know the words. It is a matter of low sight vocabulary with regards to a lack of automaticity because the students recognize the words too slowly, the result of which is a slow reading speed. Consequently, students with low sight vocabularies are likely to read with poor understanding, if only because their memories are taxed:

The beginning of the paragraph is forgotten by the time they have struggled to the end of it (Nutall, 1996, p.54). Second, students have come to expect reading English to be an academically isolated, meaningless, and unenjoyable teacher directed task that they have absolutely no control over: Something which is fraught with mouthing words in front of a teacher and group of classmates or searching through an otherwise meaningless text to answer a set of questions that will determine a score on some sort of school based assessment--a gatekeeper which they feel successful students understand, but they never will--anything but an enjoyable autonomous life long out of class activity.

To help students start on an autonomous learning path at the first step of Krashen's model, graded readers, we need to help them address both areas. First, we need to help them learn a technique based on increasing automaticity: "over learning

words [encountering repeatedly words with which they have some familiarity] to the point that they are automatically recognized in their printed form" (Day, Bamford & Richards, 1998, p. 16) so learners can carry "out the task without awareness or attention" (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1997, p. 28). Thus, less cognitive energy is spent on lexical processing whereby lexical automaticity of sight vocabulary increases and fosters reading speed increases (Anderson, 1999).

Samuels (1979) posed one such solution for this problem but with a different population: a repeated reading (RR) technique to improve learner automaticity with L1 learning disabled students. In this technique, learners increase their lexical sight automaticity through repeated exposure to vocabulary by reading the same material over and over until the recognition of vocabulary becomes automatic.

Niel Anderson, seeing a similar need in L2 settings, adapted Samuels' technique for use with L2 learners. Addressing a group of local educators at the Taipei 2002 PanAsian Conference, Anderson suggested an adaptation of Samuel's RR procedure, a Rate Build Up procedure (RBU), and suggested that it be used with material at student's *i* minus level -- material that is below the students' *i* (current level of competence) (see Day, Bamford & Richards, 1998)--to increase lexical automaticity and reading speeds of Taiwanese learners of English:

In this activity, students are given a text appropriate for the level they read at or just below. Readers have sixty seconds to read as much material as they can. They then begin reading again from the beginning of the text and are given an additional sixty seconds. They are to read more material during the second sixty-second period than in the first. The drill is repeated a third and a fourth time. The purpose of this activity is to re-read 'old' material quickly, gliding into the new. As their eyes move quickly over the 'old' material the students actually learn how to process the material more quickly. The exercise does not really emphasize moving the eyes quickly, rather the material is to be processed and comprehended more efficiently. As students participate in this rate building activity, they learn that they indeed can increase their reading rate. (Anderson, 2002, p. 16)

For students who are unable to begin at the first rung of Krashen's steps due to low automaticity, the RBU procedure promises such an entrance. It should be noted, however, that while the RBU procedure proposes that students engage material below their *i* level, it should not be seen as a permanent delay or rejection of moving towards more advanced material. Instead, such a procedure provides an interim where lower level learners can take a step back to engage materials slightly below their level in order to increase their sight vocabulary; thereby reducing the load on their short term memory (Eskey, 2005) and increasing their reading speed. This reduced load, in turn, allows readers to devote greater cognitive capacity to higher comprehension skills (Anderson, 1999). Thus, the *i* minus 1 theory should not be seen as a challenge or a replacement of Krashen's *i* plus 1 (Eskey, 2005). Rather it fits into the long term growth of the students' abilities: It is a precursor, a place for low level readers to get started on Krashen's reading model to form a continuous learning ladder both in the classroom and after they leave.

The second thing we must do is also related to putting the

students in control of their learning. After we have helped them to take control of improving their reading speed, we need to help them get past the idea that reading literature is an academically isolated activity. We need to help them discover that reading literature can be a meaningful activity they can have control over both in and outside of the classroom. To do this, we need to do more than simply supply them with texts and tell them to read. Despite the surfeit of scholarship that shows the benefits of extensive reading (See Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2005) and the clear advantages of the use of literature in the classroom from a motivational point of view (See Carter, 1996), introducing it will not automatically guarantee student interest, especially with learners who have had previous unsuccessful reading experiences. Thus, the introduction of literature should be "carefully organized, both at course level and in the presentation of the material, so that students can both enjoy and profit from the work" (Hill 1997, p. 23) Consequently, we need to guide them through behaviors that will help them to see that reading can be a meaningful and enjoyable activity that they will feel confident to continue doing once outside the classroom.

This step is comprised of an empowering classroom model that explicitly explains the methodology behind the course, provides a large amount of comprehensible literary material, and trains them in three skill areas that they can transfer to their outside reading once they leave the classroom: language based literature exploration, literature for content, and literature for personal enrichment (Lazar, 2004).

2. Climbing the ladder: A classroom application

Our believing that the combination of the RBU technique and having and understanding of a set of skills offers a fresh start to Krashen's reading steps to form a continuous ladder that students can begin to use in the classroom and continue with on their own as autonomous learners once they leave and having our students accept our advice again is not a simple matter of implementation. Building confidence is not as easy as it used to be. We at the college level are no longer faced with a sea of eager young faces. When working with daunted adult EFL learners, unconditional trust is no longer something we can count on. What do we say to the downtrodden adult student who says, "I have to take this class for graduation, but I don't expect anything different"? How do we say, "Trust us on this one. It will be different. We *think* we have got it right this time, really"? Or, at least, "How about giving this a try?"

The answer to getting students started on the ladder is to re/gain their trust by gradually putting them in full control of their own learning. The first step is to visibly dispose of the “sage at the stage” approach they have come to expect by explaining everything (the theory and the pedagogy) to them up front as early as the first class: For low level learners, this can be done in the students’ first language. Sharing these ideas in the students' first language will assure understanding of the girding of the course, and it will reduce the students' affective filters--attitudes unconducive to language acquisition (Krashen, 1982)--by building a community of respect for the students' primary language identities, whether they be Mandarin, Taiwanese, or a combination of the two. If you speak the students' language(s), all the better. If not, enlist the help of a teaching partner. You can do this for the first class, the first couple of classes, or the entire term depending on the type of teaching partnership you adopt (Buckley, 1999). There is no need to cite theorists, unless, of course, a student asks, but you do need to cover the key

points: The myth of age, comprehension related hypotheses (the input hypothesis, L1 and output, monitor use and correction) and grammar. You also need to define and explain the components of the course goal.

2.1 *The myth of age*

Dispel the myth that adults are slower learners than children. Explain that while there is some truth that children perform better than adults, such as pronunciation (Long, 1990; Browne, 2000), the rate of acquisition is not necessarily one of them. In fact, when "comparing children and adults who are learning a language by the same method . . . , adults are better" (Cook, 2001, p. 134). Yes, children do seem to acquire language more quickly, but the fact is they have more time and opportunities to do it. "Older acquirers," on the other hand, "thanks to their superior knowledge of the world, understand more of the input they hear and read" (Krashen, 2004, p. 10) and have generally a better rate of acquisition (Ellis, 2000). Encourage them that as adult learners they are in a very advantageous position to make a fresh start.

2.2 *Comprehension related hypotheses*

To further build students' confidence and demonstrate that you are releasing control, share the methodology behind the course: Outline the comprehension related hypotheses and other important matters that are applicable to the course you are about to undertake. Explain how the Comprehension Hypothesis, previously termed the "Input Hypothesis" (Krashen, 2004, p, 1), is closely related to other hypotheses and important items: L1 and output, monitor use and correction, and grammar).

2.2.1 *The input hypothesis*

Tell the students how the levels of a graded reader series fit into Krashen's *i* plus 1 hypothesis. If a learner's current is *i* (current level of competence), then "comprehensible input is *i* plus 1, the next step in the developmental sequence" (Cook, 2000, p. 47). Also explain that our language abilities improve on a continuum (Krashen, 2004), and that the graded difficulty of the graded reader series will help them to naturally move along this continuum.

2.2.2 *LI and output*

Be clear about how L1 and output will be addressed differently in the course than the traditional classrooms they have attended in the past. While there is a long history of not allowing L1 in the classroom, other than the reason that the teacher may not speak the language, there is little evidence to support absolute restriction of responsible L1 use (Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Cook, 2000; Hosada, 2000), especially with low level learners (Swain & Lapkin, 2000).

Explain that there is a place for their L1 in your classroom, and that you will not ban L1 use. Instead, you, and your teaching partner if you have one, will speak the target language much of the time and that you will encourage student attempts to use it (Willis, 1996), but that they can respond in their L1 until they feel comfortable. Add that oral output "emerges on its own as a result of building competence via comprehensible input . . . Speaking is a result of acquisition and not its cause" (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 48). Assure them that "comprehensible input-based methods encourage speaking but do not force it. Students are not called on; rather, participation is voluntary" (Krashen, 2004, p. 8).

A demonstration of your commitment to this procedure will result in a few students speaking in English at first. Many others may remain reticent in the beginning, but, as they feel safe, more and more will join in. Some reading activities such as story telling, story retelling, role play, and drama can also encourage reduced reticence (Greenwood, 1998; Wessels, 1986).

2.2.3 *Monitor use and correction*

Talk about correction strategies. Even at the lowest level, your classroom will consist of some students with higher abilities than others and a variety of expectations with regards to correction, some of whom will focus on errors to the point that little output is attempted. Others will crave accuracy and the safety of teacher correction. These behaviors can seriously restrict output, so you need to address these areas right away. Explain that monitor use--the student's internal editor--can stifle communication due to an over attention to errors. You will have cases of under uses as well, students who apply the editor too infrequently. This can also be problematic but less so at early stages. Assure the students that they should apply their monitors only when it does not interfere with communication. You also need to clearly define a correction policy: Explain that you are focusing on fluency in the discussions at this early stage and will avoid interrupting communication for overt correction. If you feel you must employ correction at this stage, explain that mistakes are not to be discouraged. Instead, they should be seen as gifts to the class. Then, use gentle correction strategies that do not interfere with the flow of communication. There are many ways to do this such as making notes on the blackboard towards the end of class without noting who made them and addressing them as a group (See Harmer, 2003).

2.3 *Grammar*

Address grammar right away. Extensive reading and the input hypothesis are based on the idea that "if input is understood, and there is enough of it, the necessary grammar is automatically provided." Thus, "the teacher need not deliberately teach grammar" (Cook, 2000, p. 48), and there is an enormous amount of scholarship against doing so, especially at the early stages. Nevertheless, with adult learners, there is no need to completely dismiss the discussion of grammar from the comprehension model as long as it is done in such a way that it facilitates acquisition and empowerment. In fact, strict avoidance may even be harmful. Adult students expect grammar, and they are painfully aware of it. It has hung over them in their traditional language classroom experiences, and if you do not confront it head on, they will wait uncomfortably until you do. Although direct teaching via traditional grammar exercises would perpetuate fears and subvert the acquisition approach you and your students are about to engage in, the material used at this level--graded readers--is based on a graded grammatical--among other attributes--system, and you should explain that to them.

You can also responsibly address grammar by heightening the students' awareness of the forms they are going to encounter: In many reader series, starters will incorporate the present continuous, present simple, future going to, imperatives, some modal verbs; in level 1, the past simple, etc. (See individual series grading schemes: Hill, 1997, 2001). Addressing grammar in this way can place students in control of the material by helping them to become aware of structures and thus assist in acquisition. An activity that works well to heighten awareness

is a brief overview of verb tense forms, not the meanings--meanings will come naturally from the context of the graded readers. Overviews of forms can be done either directly or through a discovery activity (See Harmer, 2003). The point is to put the students in control of what they read, whether it be graded readers in your class library or the ones you hope they will continue to encounter at libraries and book shops long after the class is over.

2.4 *Define the course goal*

Explain that the course is designed to help them become autonomous learners who can begin to climb the literature ladder and define what an autonomous learner is: learners who have "acquired enough of the second language [and enough skills] so that at least some authentic input is comprehensible, enough to ensure . . . the ability to acquire still more language" (Krashen, 2004, p. 9) to be empowered to continue to engage materials outside of the classroom in a meaningful and enjoyable way in order to continue to progress on their own. As a result, at the end of the course, they will not be completely proficient, “just good enough to continue to improve without us” (p. 7). Further explain that the course will assist them to do this by introducing several skills in the classroom that will help them gain an "understanding of what is read" (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1997, p. 193) and take control of their reading when they read literature outside of the class: attaining a basic reading speed and an understanding of skills in three areas, language based skills, literature for content, and literature for personal enrichment.

2.5 *Explain the course model*

Krashen's reading model and graded readers

Discuss Krashen's reading model and the first step, graded readers. Briefly outline each step of Krashen's reading model (Table 1). Then define graded readers and bring an armload of graded readers into class from each of the six levels. Explore each of the levels together, let students get familiar with them, and discuss the grammatical, lexical, and literary element structure of each level or at least the ones you will probably be using. You can find a description in the reader catalogue and in the preface of many readers. You may or may not wish to address the subject of whether readers are in fact literature or just a precursor to the model. Whether you accept that readers, because of the simplified literary elements found in each, regardless of gradation, are indeed literature or agree with those that heatedly argue they are not, it is important to point out the graded structure of the literary elements in readers are designed to help students gain a better grasp of the skills needed to engage more authentic literary materials as they climb to each level.

2.5.1 *Increasing reading speed*

Briefly discuss the importance of reaching a reading speed that allows students to understand longer passages. Explain that the average native speaker reads between 150 and 425 words per minute and adjusts his or her reading speeds for different types of reading activities. In extensive reading, for example, readers need to acquire a 200 word per minute level to effectively understand the passages and the *i* minus 1 activity can help them to increase their reading speed to this level.

2.5.2 *Building reading skills*

After you have addressed reading speed, discuss the reading skills students will need to become familiar with to make reading literature both meaningful and enjoyable. Explain that

reading is more than voicing graphemes, phonemes, or words on a page or answering a set of school based assessment questions. Reading can be an extensive activity that autonomous learners engage in. Explain that knowledge of or a heightened awareness of certain key skills can facilitate the autonomous process and make it a much more meaningful and enjoyable activity: Some are language based skills, others are in the area of literature as content, and still others, which make up a key element of self-access reading for personal enjoyment, help to make literature a form of personal enrichment (see Table 3). There is no need to go into each area in too much detail at first. You can explore each more fully in conjunction with the RBU procedure during the daily lessons and activities as the course goes along. The main thing is to let the students feel you are putting them in control by telling them everything up front.

3. Getting started

After you have outlined the classroom model with the students, you need to develop access to large amounts of compelling reading material below, at, and above their *i* level. Finding students' exact *i* level is difficult, if not impossible, as this is often a vague term, but, for the purposes of the reading program, you can get a rough estimate by determining the students' reading levels. In a full self-access environment, students will often gravitate to the level they are comfortable with, some choosing to read above their level and some to read below depending on a number of variables (Gardner, Miller, & Swan, 1999), but for this stage, keeping with the theme of empowering the students with exit skills, you will want to introduce a more controlled method that students can meta-cognitively grasp and later use independently outside of the classroom. To do this you can use Betts' five finger method (Betts, 1946; Schirmer& Lockmann, 2001) or choose from a variety of other reading level applications (Calkins, 1998).

Once you have determined a mean level for the class, you will need to prepare the books. The amount of readers you choose to use at each level will depend on the length of your course and what type of approach you take: A traditional approach, a self-access class driven classroom, or a combination of the two.

In the traditional approach, each student will purchase and read the same set of graded readers and engage in activities which are tailored to each text with the class in the order presented in the teacher directed syllabus.

In a full self-access center classroom, materials and activities will be more self-directed: Students will engage in a variety of self-access activities where each student is reading a different text at a different time, but the activities are designed to be general enough to cover a variety of student text selections. For this type of class, one of a variety of types of class libraries or self-access centers will need to be established (See Gardner, Miller, & Swan, 1999; Baker & Hung, 2004; Lazar, 2004). Some institutions may have grant money or other funds available for the creation of such centers through initial bulk purchases, but for many teachers doing it on a small scale within the confines of the classroom community having students purchase the books is a much more attractive option because it offers students a sense of involvement with both the texts and the creation of the library: In a class of 25 students, for example, if each student purchases two graded readers and temporarily donates them

to the semester or year long collection or makes them a permanent donation to the self-access center, you will have 50 books to choose from. Larger classes or classes that you teach several sections of can have even more. Book selections can grow exponentially with the purchase of more books per student and whether the donations are temporary, taken home at the end of the course, or become permanent donations.

In a combination classroom, students purchase a set of texts that will be read according to a teacher directed syllabus schedule. They also engage in specially tailored activities with one or more self-selected texts from the self-access library which can be read in a more a self selected manner, giving an authentic opportunity for extensive reading with the aid of the understanding of the skills they have learned in the more teacher directed lesson.

The fresh start stage

Once you have explained the course, determined the students' levels, chosen the type of course you will offer, and set up access to materials, you are ready to begin the fresh start phase. In this phase, regardless of which type of course you are involved in--a traditional approach, a self-access approach, or a combination of the two--begin this stage by having students read a few graded readers below their *i* level until they are comfortable with the longer nature and structure of readers. In this stage you can begin to work in other areas such as training students to learn how to select texts--strategies on how to explore the front and back covers, the introduction, and possibly reviews and author backgrounds as prediction exercises to whether they will find a work interesting enough to select it from the library or later from a bookshop--as well as language based skills, literature as content, and literature as personal enrichment activities you feel are appropriate (see Table 3).

After the students are comfortable with the length of the passages in the graded readers and have learned to how select them, you can begin using Anderson's RBU activity. Continue using this activity at least until the students reach a 200 word per minute level--the speed needed for extensive reading (Hill, 2001)--with materials at their *i* minus 1 level, or, you can, of course, continue to work on reading speed improvement throughout the course if you and the students wish to pursue this as a goal. Regardless of the duration of the application, practicing the RBU procedure at a predictable time in each lesson and having students record their progress on an RBU sheet (Table 2) will help to set up a predictable order for your classroom and create a sense of accomplishment as students see their reading scores increase.

Table 2: Sample student RBU progress sheet

Note: This chart illustrates progress a typical student may experience, not actual data. The first reading score on the first passage of each day can be used to measure course progress. Day-to-day progress may fluctuate and occasionally retard and plateau, but overall progress is common for most students. Students may also experience a temporary drop if they move to a higher level text or encounter wider page sizes or larger type faces.

As your students continue working with the RBU procedure, you will want to continue introducing activities during pre, while, and post reading activities that illustrate other skill areas: language based skills, literature as content, and literature as personal enrichment (tables 3 and 4). Be sure to do this with communicative reading activities rather than teacher lectures or presentation as the latter two would go against the tenets of the EFL environment and putting the students in control. It would also, of course, be both unfeasible and undesirable to try to introduce too much at once, but you can introduce a little at a time from each area with each graded reader and then return to recycle previous text's content in a cyclical pattern (tables 3 and 4) as each new skill is presented. Afterwards, you can allow the students to self apply all of the skills to a self selected text as they read it extensively without teacher direction or guidance.
In a combined course for beginning students where students are working with the Starter and Level 1 selections of one of the popular series such as the Oxford Bookworm or Heinemann series, one schedule could look like this (Table 3):

Table 3: Introduction schedule

Reading and Language Based Skills / Book	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Determining one's level using Betts' method: counting the number of unknown words: no more than 5 per 100 words (This is done prior to the first book at as students move from level to level).									
RBU Procedure				x	x	x	x	x	x
Prediction skills through examination of the back cover, front cover,	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

introduction, illustration, and chapter titles									
Reading for overall comprehension	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Vocabulary skills:									
--Guessing from context		x							
--using a dictionary			x						
--ignoring words that do not interfere with meaning			x						
--*Examining meaning (word metaphor and idiom, collocation, style and register), word formation (parts of speech, prefixes and suffixes, spelling, and pronunciation), and word grammar (nouns-countable and uncountable, etc.), and adjectives and adverbs (position, etc.) can be introduced or delayed as opportunities present themselves in the texts and in keeping with the students' levels.	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Awareness of verb tenses and grammatical features			x						
Skimming and scanning skills				x	x				
Literature as Content									
Plot: Person vs. person, society, nature, themselves	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Setting: In the author's mind, minimal and generic, in dreams, fantasy, realistic places with real or fictitious names, and fictitious places with fictious names		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Genre features			x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Time				x	x	x	x	x	x
Characters: major, minor					x	x	x	x	x
Characters: flat, round						x	x	x	x
Point of view: First person narrator who seems to be the author, an invented character (major or minor), heard the story from another person, multiple narrators who each tell part of the story from their own perspective/Second person for detective stories)/Third person (complete objectivity, limited objectivity, limited omniscience, complete omniscience)							x	x	x
Dialogue (forms, tags, indirect, and stream of consciousness)								x	x
Thoughts, description, personification, images as sounds and tone and style can be introduced or delayed as opportunities present themselves in the texts and keeping with the students' levels.									x
Literature as Personal Enrichment									
Activities can vary according to students' levels, interests, and needs.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

In a traditional syllabus, each of these areas will need to be addressed without the inclusion of the last text, as self selected texts would be omitted. In a full self-access classroom, each of these areas will need to be covered in a combination of mini-lectures and general self-access activates that are general enough to be used regardless of which text each student has selected.

You may want to adjust the schedule you choose to meet your students' levels and needs and the material you are using, but the cyclical nature of returning to previous text's content to review older areas as you introduce new ones can be a valuable tool to help you reinforce skills and set up a balanced teaching plan to help build your students' confidence. To examine how this can be done, please see the lesson plan that outlines the application with a mid-course text (Table 4).

Table 4: Lesson plan See PDF

4. Moving beyond the classroom

Once students are comfortably working at or above 200 wpm and confidently applying the skills you select in each area from the checklist (Table 3), they should feel confident enough to continue working their way through the stages of the graded reader series and on their way up Krashen's ladder as they move out of the classroom and onto their own self selected texts where these skills will greatly profit them in their search for both meaning and enjoyment.

Towards the end of the course, to help students build life long autonomous behaviors, it is important to develop a link between their classroom progress and the rest of their lives. Helping students continue to develop their skills and move further having them make self selections from more authentic self-access environments outside the school--libraries and bookshops--can help them make this transition and send them on the their way with the tools they need and a place to apply them.

As your students begin to improve, both you and they will be naturally excited, but it is important to remember that some students will progress faster than others. Do not push progress. Let the increases in reading speed and acquisition of skills happen naturally: Have students read as many readers at each level as the need to become comfortable before moving on to the next level: 8 to 12 is often enough to help most students gain confidence. Some students, however, may need less, others more.

It is also important to note that as graded readers usually have five to six levels, and, if you are starting at the lowest level, it is unlikely that your students will be able to move through all the levels. In fact, you may only see them progress through a few over the course of the school year depending on your course schedule. Nevertheless, speedy progress is not the point. Progress that encourages autonomous learning is.

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