THE ART OF PREVIEW IN APPROPRIATE TEACHING/LEARNING MATERIAL SELECTION

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Abstract

This study recognised the importance of print materials and texts in effective and efficient teaching and learning. Though important, there is a proliferation of these materials in the market that learners, researchers and teachers cannot read all within the limited time available to them. They resort to the art of previewing to select the relevant ones. As previewers, they ought to look into the external and internal skeletons of materials such as textbooks, literature books, journal articles, essays and other continuous writings. The paper described skimming and scanning as important techniques for previewing. Finally, those elements and aspects of the English

Language texts to be scanned or skimmed were looked at and the importance of each highlighted.

Introduction

The importance of instructional materials in general and print materials in particular in teaching and learning cannot be over-emphasized. To instructors, they not only make teaching easier but also equip them with the methodology for their works. To learners/ researchers, a varied range of materials are at their disposal from where they make their selections. Ubahakwe (1979) defines printed texts as: "… not only the regular textbooks but all words or material printed on paper or film and fed into mechanical devices for teaching purposes"(p. 376). Robinson (1991), in emphasizing the importance of textbooks to the teacher states that:

> A textbook is complete not just in the physical sense but in the sense that the whole term's or year's course available to the students at once ..., a textbook, especially a course book provide a framework for a course, forming in essence a syllabus (p.58).

Wade & Moje (2001) supporting the importance of texts to teaching and learning also state that

> the texts teachers choose to use in lessons with adolescent readers can affect student learning, as these texts determine in no small measure to students' willingness to engage with certain kinds of knowledge. Correspondingly, texts excluded from the classroom can result in gaps in student understanding.

In the English Language, like in every other subject, we have very many textbooks competing in the market. In our schools and universities, lecturers publish new works everyday because of the 'publish or perish' syndrome and students are faced with more than enough to read and understand and sit for their examinations. This was what Wright (1980) had in mind when he states that "We write a lot of our own cases with the objective not only of finding new and lively things to do in class, but also of having the materials publish" (p.107).

Some of those printed works are not really useful for the teacher's purpose(s). According to Fodeh (1990), "In order to be really useful, a textbook must be appropriate to its intended purpose, to its users, and of course, the situation in which it will be used (p. 64).

He went further to state that:

> A textbook must not be descriptive grammar but pedagogic grammar, it must exercise patterns of thought expressed in the English language. This all important tool must widen the idiomatic and vocabulary knowledge of the student and must by and large demonstrate some correlation with other subjects in the curriculum f it is to be truly meaningful to the rising crescendo of youthful voices seeking knowledge. Above all, the textbook must be seen to offer high surrender-value to its users (p.64).

The first job of a teacher is to select from the numerous books in the market those that suit his purpose. How does he go about this? It will take the teacher ages before he could have read all in a single subject. He has to resort to previewing of the text. Choosing what to read involves both evaluating likely resources and locating useful information texts.

What Is Preview?

The preview of a text involves having a foreknowledge of what is in a print text before the actual reading of the text by employing certain techniques. A few minutes is devoted to finding out what the materials can do for us before reading the whole text. A previewer should make use of all the clues a book offers before the actual reading as familiarity with the subject makes for much easier understanding. Against this backdrop, Woolcott and Unwin (1983) opined that:

> If we develop the ability to recognize the structure of what we are reading, we shall find our way more speedily through it and we also be understanding it more easily. A poorly planned piece of communication I lacks a recognizable skeleton or identifiable signposts, will take more of the reader's time (p. 151).

Techniques for Previewing

The techniques for preview are skimming and scanning. They aid critical reading. Skimming and Scanning are reading styles adopted for different situations. Because what people read varies from novels, textbooks, manuals, magazines, newspapers, mails, to other things and the purpose(s) for reading also ranges from enjoyment, information, examination, completing a task, exploration, reviewing to seeking to get detailed information, the reading techniques will change to suit the purposes mentioned: from searching skimming to a slower pace (critical reading) for careful assimilation of important information. Woolcott & Unwin (1983) noted that:

> reading more efficiently ... is a matter of being able to vary your reading speed and adjust it to the purpose of your reading and the difficulty of the subject-matter (p. 149).

It is this change in speed that prompted Francis Bacon to say that; "some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed and some few to be chewed and digested" (Cited in Woolcott & Unwin, 1983). These reflect the different reading styles.

Skimming

Skimming is moving our eyes quickly through the whole page or text to get a general sense of what it is all about. It is a very rapid reading used in identifying the main ideas of a text. The speed is three or four times faster than normal reading. It is a technique used by people who have a lot to read within a limited time. Skimming, according to Woolcott and Unwin (1983) "is glancing at speed over the printed words on a page" (p.149). They noted that as we skim, we do not note individual words but rather a general impression is formed. The art of skimming demands great concentration. The reader is expected to anticipate what comes next, that is thinking faster and making a prediction of what to expect next. Such anticipation according to Woolcott & Unwin helps 'the reader to keep a firm grasp on the thread, i.e., the author's train of thought and also helps memory' (op- cit). They went further to identify the use of skimming to include:

* To preview
* To identify priorities — here to read more slowly.
* To find a required piece of information
* To help memory, by immediate review of what we have just read (p.150)

According to The Learning Centre (2010), when skimming, you should follow the procedure below, adapting it to your purpose

- Read the title.
- Note the writer's name.
- Note the date and place of publication.
- Read the first paragraph completely.
- Read sub-headings and first sentences of remaining paragraphs.

As you read, pick up main ideas, key words (words that tell you who, what, when, where, how many, and how much), and transition markers (words like 'however', 'alternatively', 'additionally', and so on), which suggest the direction of ideas in the text.

http://learningcentre.curtin.edu.au/skills/reading_tech.cfm

Scanning

Scanning is a technique used when we are moving our eyes quickly over a text to find something or to see whether it contains anything you want to read. According to McDonald (2012), "scanning involves getting your eyes to quickly scuttle across sentence and is used to get just a simple piece of information."

It differs from skimming in that in most cases one knows what one is looking for in scanning, for instance, looking up a number in a telephone directory or a word in a dictionary. A reader can fluctuate from scanning to skimming and skimming to scanning. The essence of scanning is to avoid the waste of precious time lost in reading irrelevant details.

One can therefore say that previewing means looking at the external and internal skeleton of a book or writing through the techniques of skimming and scanning. While skimming is for the external skeleton, scanning is for the internal skeleton.

Preview of the English Language Texts and Writings

Textbooks

Any piece of writing has a structure, the pattern into which the writer has organized his ideas. A preview of an English textbook involves skimming through the contents page, the preface which is the author's signposting, a check of the index which gives some idea of the relative importance of topics and helps ones skimming and anticipation. The preview of index also exposes the reader to the tiniest details not mentioned in the table of contents. A textbook can also be looked at in terms of the number of chapters, sections or sub-sections, which are numbered and headed, in an easily recognizable structure. One should sample by skimming the first and last chapters or a representative chapter on a familiar topic. All this helps the reader to form an opinion about whether the book is worth reading or not.

Literature Texts

Literature is an asset to be used as the language teaching resource. The advantages of using literature as a language teaching resource were interpreted by Tasneen (2010) to include

1. Linguistic reason: Students are exposed to real, authentic usage of language in literary texts; these texts show them a variety of styles, registers and language learning materials at several stages of difficulty.

2. Methological reason: Literary texts are open to various interpretations and therefore create an enormous opportunity of interaction in a language class.

3. Motivational reason: As literary texts are the product of the writers' particular feeling about certain aspects of life, this 'genuine feel' motivates the reader a lot. Students can easily be stimulated to express their opinion, to relate the topics and the characters in the literary texts to their own life.

(http://asian-efl-journal.com/PDF/Volume-12-Issue-4-Tasneen.pdf)

Tasneen (2010) also compiled the views of the teachers and the students about the literary texts as a language teaching resource to include:

- Good resource for learning/teaching vocabulary
- Improves all four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening
- Interesting for group work
- A doorway to other cultures
- Language level sometimes too high
- Texts sometimes too long and boring
- Resources sometimes lacking
- While some teachers prefer the use of novele as language teaching resource, some students prefer short stories

Be that as it may, the language teacher should be knowledgeable in the art of previewing in today's era when everybody is a creative writer, to be able to sieve the substance from the shaft. As a previewer he/she should be able to scan for the particular genre needed, and skim for other things needed. This is because literature texts have recognizable external skeleton. A look at the initial pages tells the reader if he is handling the right genre. Dramas are written in acts, scenes and have casts. Poetry is written in verse with or without rhyming schemes while Prose is narrative in nature and often written in chapters.

Journal Articles

Journal articles can be previewed by skimming through the abstracts, introduction and conclusion and other subheadings. The abstract explicitly states all that was done in the article – what the writer sets out to do, the design of the research, methodology employed including the instrument used, findings and recommendations.

Other Continuous Writings

Using visual layout, one can determine the type of a text. Letters with two addresses show formal correspondence while one with informal greeting is an informal letter.

Narrative structure is usually chronological ... first, and then ... in addition...; descriptive essay describes procedure or process and is written ... put water in the fire, add ground mellon and then add pepper…; Argument will be organized ... because of this therefore this. Funny drawings in newspapers and magazines show cartoons. All these are external skeleton of English texts.

A previewer also looks at internal skeleton of everything he is reading through scanning technique. When scanning, he looks for the authors' use of organizers such as *for instance, for example, first, second, next, to conclude, in conclusion, the most important feature, the result is* and others. Significant words are often repeated and this draws them to our attention. Other internal structures are things written in bold, italics or in different font, size or colour; things enclosed in parenthesis and all places written 'note'.

A previewer should be able to look for skills and strategies that signify introduction, continuation, summary, etc. He must have competence to identify vital sections in books, texts and materials that have been finally selected. He then reads for understanding by marking books or by note taking and skims them for immediate revision and memorizing. Also, previewer needs to be able to recognize synopses, topic sentences in paragraphs and things underlined which may be mark of emphasis.

Conclusion

It has been established that printed texts are essential in the English language pedagogy. Because the existing texts are too numerous and do not all satisfy the teachers' yearnings for useful and appropriate materials to use for effective teaching and learning, preview of all existing texts becomes necessary. Skimming and scanning were identified as preview techniques and aspects of the English language texts to be previewed were also highlighted. We believe that preview as an art and skill will equip not only the language teacher in his choice of a text for teaching made within the shortest time frame but will also be of importance to learners and researchers who have a wide range of materials to read and choose from so as to get their tasks accomplished and their examinations passed.

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