Adapting Authentic Materials for Language Teaching

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Adapting original materials for language teaching is an incredibly subtle process—half art, half science. Clearly, the kind and degree of adapting depends on the age and language level of the student. In an effort to simplify text, it is easy to slip into the error of talking down to the reader.

To illustrate the process of adapting, I have drawn on my experience in preparing an intermediate-level 300-page ESL text for business (Darian, in press). While such material seems far removed from the primary or secondary school classroom, the process is basically the same at all levels.

I've divided our discussion into four sections: (1) semantic elements, (2) lexical elements, (3) syntactic elements, and (4) discourse elements. In this short article, we can just touch on a few considerations in each area.

Semantic elements

One hidden problem in adapting materials is connotation. Native speakers don't usually think about the primary or secondary connotation of a word—they just use it. The problem arises when the language learner is confronted with a secondary connotation of a word and, at best may know that word in its primary meaning. Take this example: Do you know any jokes that illustrate other people's values? To the language learner, the primary connotation of *illustrate* would probably be "related to art and drawing." When adapting materials, ask yourself whether a word's primary connotation would obscure the secondary meaning. If so, substitute a clearer term. The example rewritten is: Do you know any jokes about other people's values?

Here is another example that illustrates the problem of primary and secondary connotation:

Original: One of the keys to total quality management (TQM) is involving the employees.

Rewrite: One of the most important factors in total quality management (TQM) is involving the employees.

Lexical elements

One of the first things that strike us as we read through authentic materials for adapting is the prevalence of difficult words or phrases. Here are several things to keep in mind when deciding which words may cause problems.

Infrequently used words

The most obvious consideration is infrequently used words. Often they are words of Latin origin. We might argue that students from Latin language backgrounds (e.g., French, Spanish, Italian) would find these items easier than Anglo-Saxon words. However, spoken English relies more on

Anglo-Saxon vocabulary. This greater exposure to Anglo-Saxon words means there's a better chance that the learner knows the Anglo-Saxon word than its Latin counterpart in English. Here are a few examples along with proposed changes:

Original: The essence of teams is their common goal or purpose.

Rewrite: The most important element in teams is their common goal or purpose.

Original: The writer should prepare the manual in consultation with the department that needs it.

Rewrite: The writer should prepare the manual after talking with the department that needs it.

Arbitrary collocations

Collocation refers to the frequent appearance of certain words with certain other words. We can divide collocations into natural and arbitrary; that is, those that the learner can logically infer from the text (e.g., *to make a decision*) and those that he can't (e.g., to *meet* [someone's] *demands*). The arbitrary collocations are the ones that need clarifying or changing. Notice the examples and their rewrites:

Original: What makes the difference in the quality of teams?

Rewrite: Why are some teams better than others?

Original: The government played a very strong part in guiding Singapore's development.

Rewrite: The government was very influential in guiding Singapore's development.

Idioms

Idioms are often culture bound: they refer to an element in one culture that is not necessarily universal. Often, the separate words used in the idiom don't provide a clue to the meaning of the whole idiom. It is better to rewrite them into something the student has a better chance of understanding. Consider this example: Zambia has put over 145 state-owned companies under the hammer. The phrase *under the hammer* refers to auctioning off companies. The hammer is the auctioneer's hammer. The process of an auction may be fairly universal, but the individual words in this expression give no help in understanding its idiomatic meaning.

Verbs

Verbs pose all kinds of problems. Two important ones are what we might call verbal complexity and verbal ambiguity.

Verbal complexity

The more auxiliary verbs attached to the main verb, the harder that verb may be to understand. Passives, since they always have an extra verb form (be), may add to that complexity. In the first example below, the tasks mentioned are related to the development of self-managing teams.

Original: These tasks are made easier by multiskilling: developing members' abilities to do more than one task.

Rewrite: One way to accomplish these tasks is by multiskilling: developing members' abilities to do more than one task.

Original: People in some cultures are naturally more group-oriented; for example Japanese, Koreans, and Mexicans. They are more used to working together.

Rewrite: In some cultures, for example, Japanese, Korean, and Mexican, people spend more time together, inside and outside the workplace.

Verbal ambiguity

Verbal ambiguity can result from the author using a verb in its secondary connotation. What, for example, is the primary connotation of the verb *fall*?

Original: Sometimes a job falls into two categories.

Rewrite: Sometimes a job belongs in two categories.

Another potential ambiguity arises when a word has different meanings according to its stress, as in the noun *re´·cord* versus the verb *re·cord´*:

Original: Ask workers to record their daily activities.

Rewrite: Ask workers to write down their activities every day.

Ambiguity can also occur when a verb with a positive connotation (e.g., *encourage*) is used in a negative way:

Original: Assembly-line work requires a fairly low level of skills, which encourages poor work quality, since the boredom leads to high rates of absenteeism and turnover.

Rewrite: Assembly-line work requires a fairly low level of skills, which often results in poor work quality.

Definitions

The obvious aim of vocabulary study is having students understand the meaning of words. The four best ways to help the learner understand meanings of words are the use of synonyms, paraphrase, examples, and visuals. Adding these features, where needed, will go a long way to solving the problem of unknown vocabulary.

Syntactic elements

Syntactic elements that can simplify a reading include punctuation, elliptical forms, and parallelism. Of course, another way to simplify a reading is to eliminate difficult structures, such as passives.

Punctuation

If you want to indicate a close relationship between two ideas, you might use a colon instead of a period, as in this example:

Original: Power distance in a company differs by occupation. The more skilled and better educated the occupation, the smaller the power distance.

Rewrite: Power distance in a company differs by occupation: the more skilled and better educated the occupation, the smaller the power distance.

Punctuation can help avoid ambiguity in various ways. For example, dashes—not commas—can help avoid confusion in sentences with commas punctuating a series. In the following example, the rewrite uses dashes instead of commas to set off subordinate information.

Original: Choose option A, the inland location, if the company wants to be closer to major markets, raw materials, and cheap transportation.

Rewrite: Choose option A—the inland location—if the company wants to be closer to major markets, raw materials, and cheap transportation.

Elliptical forms and other deletions

Elliptical forms are especially common in conversational language. They provide a strong element of cohesion between sentences. For the language learner, they may also provide a source of confusion, especially when trying to figure out which word was deleted in the process of ellipsis. For this reason, it is sometimes desirable to add the full form back into the sentence, while being careful to keep the material sounding natural. The choice of when to do that depends on the language level of the learner. Notice the example:

Original: Think of power on a scale from low to high. At one end are countries with low power distance.

Rewrite: At one end of the scale are countries with low power distance.

Structural complexity

Structural, or syntactic, complexity includes items such as passives, modifiers, and inverted structures. Because of its complexity, the following example needs a complete rewrite:

Original: Centralization is the degree to which decision making is limited to higher levels of management. Decentralization is the degree to which decision-making power is given to people at lower levels in the company.

Rewrite: Centralized control means that a few people at the top have all the power. Decentralized control means that people at lower levels also influence the decision-making process.

Structures of modification

Because English has so many kinds of modifying structures, some are sure to be confusing. One example is that of mistaking different parts of speech. In the first example below, instead of being read as a modifier, the word *developing* could easily be confused as a verb, with countries as its object. The problem is easily solved by adding the modifying word *many*:

Original: Developing countries with different values and social systems are acquiring the new technologies.

Rewrite: Many developing countries with different values and social systems are acquiring the new technologies.

This second example is just the opposite: the word *manufacturing* could be read as a modifier instead of a verbal with its object the word *products*. The simple addition of the indefinite article *a* eliminates the ambiguity.

Original: People expect a company to have certain social responsibilities. These responsibilities may include manufacturing products in a way that does not harm the environment.

Rewrite: These responsibilities may include manufacturing a product in a way that does not harm the environment.

Long noun phrases are especially common in business and bureaucratic writing. Because they may be difficult to understand, they frequently require adaptation, as in this example:

Original: We attended the employee benefits plan implementation meeting.

Rewrite: We attended the meeting about implementation of the employee benefits plan.

Discourse elements

Many features of English at the level of the paragraph—and beyond—make reading easier or harder for the language learner. These include the use of referents, headings, and redundancy and the need to add or subtract material.

Pro forms

Pro forms—single words that replace or refer to longer constructions in a sentence—and their referents can present a variety of problems for the language learner. First, the pro form may be too far away from the phrase it replaces. There may be another intervening word that seems like the referent. In this example, *England* could easily be mistaken as the referent for the word *it*:

Original: By the beginning of World War II, Singapore had become England's main air and naval base in Asia. At the time of independence in 1965, it had a decaying infrastructure, a poorly educated population, and a loss of its old markets.

Rewrite: At the time of independence in 1965, Singapore had a decaying infrastructure, a poorly educated population, and a loss of its old markets.

The pro form may be unclear for other reasons. To what extent should you use the original referent, a paraphrase, or a pro form? Check this continuation of the example above:

Original: The new government played a very strong part in guiding the country's development. It did this by attracting foreign direct investment.

Rewrite: The government accomplished this by attracting foreign direct investment.

When you're adapting material, examine the pro forms very carefully, to make sure that their referents are clear. Sometimes it is best to repeat the original term:

Original: There are many theories about what motivates people. They include money, power, love, security, and freedom.

Rewrite: There are many theories about what motivates people. People may be motivated by money, power, love, security, and freedom.

Redundancy

Redundancy is an integral part of language. If we define redundancy as information that is made available more than one time or in more than one place, you can immediately understand the importance of redundancy in language teaching materials.

The question then becomes: Where should I add redundancy and how? Let's examine the *how* first. Here are three useful ways of adding redundancy to the text: (1) examples, (2) visuals, and (3) restatement or paraphrase. As for the *where*, I suggest adding redundancy in two situations:

(1) for important words and concepts, and (2) for difficult words and concepts. Did you notice the redundancy in the previous two sentences?

Emphasis

In reading a long passage—a page or more—even the native speaker has to decide which words and concepts are important and which are not. The challenge is much harder for the language learner. For this reason, it's sometimes worth indicating which material may be the most important in a passage. There are numerous ways of emphasizing information in written text, and you don't want to use too many forms of emphasis in the same place. Here's a short list:

- *semantic:* headings, lists, paraphrase, parallelism, footnotes
- *type:* caps, italics, boldface, change of type
- *visuals:* diagrams, tables, lists, drawings, photos
- *itemizers:* bullets, numbers, letters, typographic marks
- *hue*: white space, shading, colors

Implicitness

Certain things that are implicit in the original material may need to be made explicit for the language learner. One of the most important is the relationship expressed in transition words, such as *however*, *because*, and *after that*, which are sometimes omitted.

Original: In Japanese companies, far more levels are involved in decision making than in U.S. companies. A middle manager may write a report that suggests a course of action. The report is then sent up through the hierarchy, and senior managers give their opinion on it. At the shop or office level, participation operates through small groups.

Rewrite: In Japanese companies, far more levels are involved in decision making than in U.S. companies. For example, a middle manager may write a report that suggests a course of action. The report is then sent up through the hierarchy, and senior managers give their opinion on it. It is also sent down to small groups of workers in the office or factory for their comments.

The rewritten version above labels the relationships of example, sequence (*then*), and addition (*also*). In the following example, the relationship—one of reason—was not in the original. Notice how including the transition phrase for that reason makes the relationship much clearer.

Original: Southern Africa has not attracted much foreign direct investment, apart from mining and farming. Many southern Africans resent that their often painful efforts at economic reform have not been rewarded.

Rewrite: Southern Africa has not attracted much foreign direct investment, apart from mining and farming. For that reason, many southern Africans resent that their often painful efforts at economic reform have not been rewarded.

Adding, subtracting, and deleting material

At times it's necessary to add, subtract, or delete some of the original material for several reasons. Some material may be superfluous or too detailed, and some may be too hard to understand. Although there are places in texts where ideas need elaboration—such as paraphrasing or adding examples or visuals—the usual approach is to reduce details and other information.

Here is a before-and-after analysis. It contains two paragraphs from *The Economist* magazine about a regional bloc, the Southern African Development Community. The passage from the

adapted text is about 60 percent the size of the original. There are two major differences between the original and the adaptation: dramatic words, idioms, and arbitrary collocations become more literal; and details, including numbers, become generalizations. This second factor is responsible for much of the deleted material. Also, italics indicate which items from the original were deleted in the rewritten text:

Original 1: Southern Africa, once torn apart by war but now tentatively at peace, is enjoying an economic revival. Last year, the region's GDP jumped by an average of over 6%, *a rate more often associated with Asia than with sluggish Africa.* For the first time in many years, the economies in every one of the 12 members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), *a regional economic body*, grew in 1996; and in eight of them the growth was over 5%. *This year they may again do well.*

Rewrite 1: The region of Southern Africa has had its problems, including war and weather. At present, though, it is having an economic revival. Last year, the region's gross domestic product (GDP) increased by 6%. For the first time in many years, there was growth in every country of the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Original 2: Is this just a blip on a continent where wild swings in fortune are common, or the beginning of a genuine economic turnaround? Cyclical good luck certainly provides part of the answer. Southern Africa, like the rest of the continent, still depends heavily on selling what it can dig out of the ground or pluck from the trees. The past two rainy seasons have been unusually good, bringing in bumper harvests. Good rains last year enabled Mozambique, *a long-term recipient of food aid*, to reap a record harvest, making it now almost self-sufficient in grain. In Africa, rain alone can swell or shrink an economy. *After a dry season and poor harvest, Zimbabwe's GDP shrank in 1995 by over 3%; a year later, after good rains, it had shot up 6%.*

Rewrite 2: Is this a permanent change or just a short-term trend? Good luck has helped. Southern Africa still depends a great deal on farming, and the past two seasons have had extremely good rains. This helped Mozambique to produce one of its best grain crops ever. However, a few years of dry weather could destroy most of this progress.

Conclusion

Teachers adapt authentic materials for different classroom uses, depending on their students' age and English language proficiency. No matter what the source of the material or its purpose in class, however, successful adaptation requires careful attention to the semantic, lexical, syntactic, and discourse elements of the original text. By following the guidelines presented in this article, teachers can help their students improve their comprehension of written English.

References

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