

### Learner Factors in Grading Tasks

The grading of content for a language program is an extremely complicated and difficult business, even for syllabus designers who have a great deal of experience. In this presentation I shall be able to deal with some factors, namely learner factors.

Learner factors consist of "outside the head" factors and "inside the head" factors (Pearson and Johnson). "Outside the head" factors include grammatical complexity of the text (input), the length of the text, the propositional density (how much information it contains and the extent to which this information is recycled), the amount of low frequency vocabulary, the speed of spoken texts and the number of speakers involved, the explicitness of the information, the discourse structure and the clarity with which is signaled (for example paragraphs in which the main point is buried away will probably be more difficult to process than those in which the main idea is clearly presented in the opening sentence).

"Inside the head" factors include all those things which the learner brings to the task of understanding and using language. If comprehension is a process of building bridges between the known and the unknown, it means that we start with a knowledge framework and attempt to fit new information into it. In those cases where the new information will not fit into our pre-existing framework, we may have to modify the framework itself.

I can illustrate this as follows. When reading or listening to a story set in a bank, we can call up our mental bank "map" to help us understand the story. This map is a composite made from all our previous bank experiences. If these experiences have been restricted to our ex-USSR state banks, and the story we are reading/listening to is set in Midland Bank, we may have difficulty comprehending some of the things that are going on. As a result of reading/listening to the story, we may have to change our bank "map" to accommodate several new pieces of information.

Brindley suggests that, in addition to background knowledge, learner factors will include confidence, motivation, learning pace, observed ability in language skills, cultural knowledge/awareness and linguistic knowledge. He proposes a list of questions which need to be considered in relation to each of these factors. These are as follows:

Confidence:

- How confident does the learner have to be to carry out the task ?
- Does the learner have the necessary level of confidence ?

Motivation:

- How motivating is the task ?

Prior learning experience:

- Does the task assume familiarity with certain learning skills ?
- Does the learner's prior learning experience provide the necessary learning skills/strategies to carry out the task ?

Learning pace:

- How much learning material has the learner shown she/he is capable of handling ?
- Is the task broken down into manageable parts ?

Observed ability in language skills:

- What is the learner's assessed ability in the skills concerned ?
- Does this assessment conform to his/her observed behaviour in class ?
- In the light of the teacher's assessment what overall level of performance can reasonably be expected ?

Cultural knowledge/awareness:

- Does the task assume cultural knowledge ?
- If so, can the learner be expected to have it ?

- Does the task assume knowledge of a particular subject ?

Linguistic knowledge:

- How much linguistic knowledge does the learner have ?

- What linguistic knowledge is assumed by the task ?

As I have already noted, input and learner factors are not always independent. There will be an interaction between the grammatical complexity of the input and the learner's level of linguistic knowledge. The problem for the teacher or materials developer is in judging just how much linguistic and background knowledge the learner is likely to have.

The assumptions made by a speaker or writer about the cultural knowledge possessed by the listener or reader can have an important effect on the ability of the second language learner to comprehend a text. A number of studies have shown that the ability of learners to comprehend a text can be adversely affected by the cultural assumptions they make. For example, Nunan (1985) found that the lack of appropriate background knowledge was a more significant factor in the ability of second language learners to comprehend school texts than linguistic complexity as measured by various readability formulae.

To sum up, there is a problem for the teacher or materials writer wanting to accommodate to the learner's cultural knowledge or lack of knowledge.

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