

# A Foundations-First Approach to Fluent Reading

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Several years ago, something was going seriously wrong in my upper-intermediate reading/writing class. The students were unhappy and not very productive. They seemed especially to be struggling with the text, a contemporary non-fiction best seller that had been chosen for them. I tried my best to motivate the students to read, but there was a lot of grumbling. One young woman gave me a steely-eye stare and said, "I hate this book. I would not read it even in my own language." Several said, "The vocabulary is too difficult." I was discouraged and felt I was letting them down.

Flash forward. More recently, also in an intermediate-level class, I caught students reading their novels during the break. In fact, I had to tell them to put the books away so we could get on with our other readings. I sometimes walked into class to see students showing each other their novels and talking animatedly. During weekly "book club" sessions, it did not take much to get them started. They got right into asking each other questions about the novels they were reading, and soon I overheard them asking their classmates if they could borrow the book.

I noticed that their reading speed was improving, as well. After seven weeks of one-minute fluency drills, some of them approached 160 words per minute, up from around 110 words at the beginning of the term. Moreover, they seemed to enjoy writing short response journal entries about the novels, and they appreciated the fact that they did not have to answer comprehension questions. I only required that they enjoy the experience.

No *Mutiny on the Bounty* in that class. Why? In the first place, they chose their own titles. More-

over, they were not reading an original, lexically-dense version that was not intended for them. There were no close-reading sessions where they got bogged down in analyzing grammatical structures. I rarely saw a dictionary and almost never saw any glosses in the margins. Because it takes only one week to read these graded readers, students could easily read the three assigned books in one ten-week term. In fact, one student ordered several more titles on the Internet to share with his wife who was not a student here. He finished his three novels and read two of hers.

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Ahhhh. Fluency. For many ESL students, the attainment of fluency in reading remains elusive. Every year, thousands of foreign students flock to Oregon to study in institutions of higher learning. Those who are bound for college in the US and who are less proficient in English enroll in intensive English programs. They hope to acquire academic language skills sufficient to allow them to pass the TOEFL test in order to start taking university classes. ESL students in these intensive English programs, especially those whose L1 does not use the roman alphabet, often struggle to read accurately, much less fluently.

Typical intensive English programs in Oregon have students mostly from the Middle East and Asia. It is these students who, even if quite literate in their native languages, often have difficulty grappling with reading in English. Their problems with English range from mastering basic decoding skills to developing complete comprehension of a text via a knowledge of the text's features: its vocabulary, structure, cohesive devices, discourse patterns, and genre features. Many reading strategies mastered in the L1, such as previewing a text, scanning for information, guessing

from context, and judiciously using a dictionary, can somewhat easily transfer to reading in English. However, many students still have fluency issues that affect their ability to fully comprehend what they are trying to read.

## Whole Language Learning

The goal of getting students to reach fluency has been around for a long time. In the late 1980s and into the mid 1990s, reading was approached from a whole-language learning perspective. At that time, proponents of whole-language learning advocated that students read massive amounts of authentic text, primarily novels written for native speakers, then do copious amounts of writing. Explicit language instruction was frowned upon; i.e., the emphasis was on the “wholeness” of language, not on the “bits and pieces of phonemes, graphemes, morphemes, and words” (Brown, 2001: 48). Students were not expected to completely understand what they read, but rather to sample the text to find the few things that they could understand. It was assumed that after copious amounts of reading and journal writing, clarity would emerge, and then, accuracy would finally be achieved.

For example, in the early 1990s, a Fluency First program consisted of a three-course sequence where students were first taught to “write intelligibly and with relative ease, and to comprehend popular fiction” (MacGowan-Gilhooly & Tillyer, 1996: ¶3). Clarity was the goal of the second phase: students wrote well-developed prose with lexical accuracy. In the third course, grammatical and mechanical accuracy were stressed. “In all three courses, students read about 1,000 pages of unabridged text, and write upwards of 10,000 words” (MacGowan-Gilhooly & Tillyer, 1996: ¶3).

However, the experiment in whole-language learning failed to live up to expectations. Even the original proponents of the Fluency First approach admitted that “efforts to arrive at a reliable assessment of reading ability improvement ... have been unsatisfactory” (MacGowan-Gilhooly & Tillyer, 1996: ¶9). In fact, after the Whole Language Approach was introduced in 1987 to L1 students in school systems across California, students’ achievement test

results plummeted. By the early 1990s, according to Hinkel:

On national tests of reading, California 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders started to show up in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> place from the bottom among the 50 states, together with Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi. . . . The whole point here is that if whole language and fluency first failed miserably with native speakers, non-natives don’t have a prayer of learning anything this way.” (Personal e-mail, July 25, 2008).

Some good did come out of the whole-language experiment. Nowadays, whole language is a term used to describe the wholeness of language and lends itself to such widely-accepted approaches as cooperative, participatory learning, and student-centered learning with foci on the social, community-building nature of learners. Wholeness often means the use of authentic, natural language, as opposed to pedagogically contrived language, along with the integration of the four skills and holistic assessment techniques.

*A foundations-first approach relies on integration of skills.*

For example, Iancu (2005) integrates a substantial number of pre-reading activities into her lessons. She starts with watching and listening to short sections of a video based on the selected novel, then has students talk about the video. This results in a good deal of foundation work in vocabulary acquisition. Students then read the corresponding portion of the novel. Iancu is careful to select novels that are of high interest to her students and which are close to, but somewhat above, their proficiency level. Since students usually do not have high comprehension of the text, she tells them to just find passages that look familiar and try to read them. This, of course, is not what most people think of when they think of reading a novel, but it is a characteristic of the whole-language approach.

## Foundations First Overview

In contrast to the whole-language approach, a foundations-first approach is designed to make sure that students do, indeed, have a high level of comprehension as they read. In common with a wholeness-of-language approach, a foundations-first approach relies on integration of skills. Integrating skills means

deliberately involving all four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in a principled, balanced way. It is best implemented in a language course in which fairly equal time is given to four strands: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and finally, fluency development (Nation, 2008: 1–2).

The premise behind a foundations-first approach to reading is that for fluency to develop, there needs to be a period of intensive language learning from reading and studying short texts that are somewhat difficult. After a sufficient amount of language proficiency has been acquired, fluency emerges, especially when the students have opportunities to read extensively. Fluency is especially likely to develop if the extensive reading is not challenging, but rather is at the learner’s proficiency level.

Intensive reading focuses primarily on bottom-up reading skills, such as “word recognition, spelling and phonological processing, morphosyntactic parsing, and lexical recognition and accessing” (Hinkel, 2006: 120). In addition, intensive reading includes such activities as finding the main idea, finding major and minor supporting details, finding pronoun referents, inferencing, interpreting graphics, recognizing discourse patterns (i.e., definition, listing, exemplification), and recognizing cohesive devices.

While grammar knowledge is important, more vital to bottom-up reading is lexical competency. This is because “language is grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar” (Hunston & Francis, 2000: 280). It is primarily through intensive reading that the deliberate build-up of lexical competence occurs. Vocabulary is especially important for university-bound students because, in order to successfully comprehend academic materials, the L2 reader needs to know about 5,000 word families (Hu & Nation, 2000).

Having acquired proficiency in the fundamentals, i.e., bottom-up processing, the reader is ready for top-down processing. This, according to some researchers, is seen as “additive or compensatory” in relation to bottom-up processing (Birch, 2002; Koda, 2005).

As a firm foundation in language proficiency is being established, the student is starting to become

fluent. However, it is during extensive reading that the conditions for faster reading and a higher level of comprehension occur. This, of course, assumes that the reader is a rapid decoder and has a well-developed vocabulary. Thus equipped, she can read quickly, experiences the pleasure that comes with being able to engage in the ideas in the text (Waring, 1997), and is able to evaluate and synthesize information.

## Strands 1 and 2: Meaning-focused

A foundations-first approach takes into account the four strands in Nation’s (2008) balanced language course: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. This approach begins with the assumption that in the meaning-focused input strands, *the material must not be beyond the learner’s proficiency level*. This is a key distinction between a

foundations-first approach and a wholeness-of-language approach. “Meaning-focused input involves getting input through listening and reading where the

learners’ focus is on understanding the message and where only *a small proportion of language features are outside the learners’ present level of proficiency* [italics added]” (p. 1). In the meaning-focused output strand, according to Nation (2008), reading is related to speaking and writing where “the learners’ focus is on others understanding the message” (p. 1).

## Strand 3: Intensive Reading

During the language-focused learning strand, the student engages in intensive reading, where the material is beyond the student’s proficiency level. As a result, the overall message is not worked out until a great deal of attention has been paid to language features. Students “consult dictionaries in reading and writing ... get language-focused feedback on their writing ... deliberately learn new vocabulary ... practise spelling ... and study grammar and discourse features” (pp. 1–2).

For the majority of learners (those beyond the beginning stages of learning the language), a strong

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foundation in knowledge of language features of text, along with skill in using a variety of reading strategies, can be had via intensive reading. The aim of the intensive reading of a particular text is comprehension of the text. However, the overall curricular goal of a course should be the transferable skill of being able to comprehend *a variety of texts*, not exclusively *the one text* or set of texts used in the course. In other words, there should be a focus on transferable language knowledge. Elements that contribute to this transferability are decoding skills, lexis, structure, cohesion, information structure, genre features, and strategies.

## Decoding

The first sub-skill that a beginning learner must master is decoding. At a very basic level, for a few adult learners who are the least proficient readers, work must be done on *phonics*, the recognition of written forms of the language and being able to “connect them with their spoken forms and their meanings” (Nation, 2008: 9). It is a very demanding task for these students to visually process words and letters. Initially, beginners learn the shapes of the letters of the alphabet. Students whose L1 does not use the alphabet system will need to work on sound-letter correspondences. In English, this involves regular rules for most words, especially those derived from Latin and Greek. Unfortunately, there are quite a few exceptions, especially among the high-frequency words, most of which come from old English. For these students, a systematic syllabus in phonics instruction may be in order.

Also within the realm of decoding is *phonemic awareness*: being aware that words consist of individual sounds. Wallace (2001) points out that there is a powerful connection “between phonemic awareness, the ability to process words automatically, and reading achievement” (p. 23). In addition, there is the often overlooked fact that some students need to overcome a lifetime of reading from right to left, or from top to bottom, and so must practice reading from left to right. Inadequate control over directionality can have an adverse effect on students’ recognition of words (for example, confusing *girl* with *grill*) at the basic decoding level.

## Lexical Knowledge

The lexical knowledge that is vital in the intensive reading process can and should be directly taught. Hinkel (2006) asserts that “irrespective of their aspirations to enter universities, L2 learners need to acquire substantial vocabulary to achieve competencies in practically all L2 skills, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking” (p. 122). Direct teaching of vocabulary is advocated by Hinkel (2006). She notes that “explicit teaching of vocabulary represents the most effective and efficient means of vocabulary teaching [while] incidental learning leads to significantly lower rates of vocabulary retention” (p. 122). A vocabulary of 2,000 word families is considered sufficient for daily communication needs (Nation, 2001: 15). For the comfortable reading of general, non-specialist texts, 95% to 98% of the running words on the page (about 5,000 word families) are needed (Nation, 2001: 147).

Having so many words to deal with, an instructor may be at a loss as to where to start. Nation (2008) suggests dealing with high-frequency vocabulary first, dealing quickly with or ignoring items that occur infrequently. Students need

strategies for tackling the unknown words they encounter in any text, such as guessing from context, using word parts, and using a dictionary judiciously. They need to learn to engage in vocabulary-retention activities, such as using flashcards (pp. 38–39).

Grammar features that students meet in intensive reading passages need to be analyzed and explained. Learners expect grammar instruction. “Focusing on grammar features during intensive reading provides a good opportunity to satisfy this expectation and at the same time to deal with grammar in a meaningful context” (Nation, 2008: 40). As with vocabulary, attention should be first given to high frequency grammatical structures, while low-frequency grammar points should be dealt with later, more as a way to help the learner comprehend the passage rather than as points to be mastered for written or oral production.

At higher levels of cognitive processing, pre-reading activities help facilitate comprehension and stimulate interest. In addition, discourse features such as cohesive devices, rhetorical patterns, information

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structure, and genre features can be focused on, analyzed, and explained in the context of the short intensive reading passages. Most of the current ESL academic reading textbooks provide appropriate language-focus activities. In addition, activities to be done during reading help students focus on comprehending abstract concepts and realize relationships among ideas. Post-reading activities check comprehension and enable students to expand on the ideas and information in the text.

Intensive reading passages, because of their inherent difficulty, are short. They are selected on the basis of their ability to focus on language learning and “teach rather than just give practice” (Nation, 2008: 40). Foundational language knowledge, skills, and strategies gained during intensive reading need to be *transferable* to any text, not just the ones used in the course. It is important that the material not contain too many unknown or difficult items.

Mastery of the sub-skills is what a foundations first approach is all about. This mastery begins with intensive reading. When students are reading intensively, they are, by definition, not reading fluently. They are putting a great deal of effort into learning a lot of new language. However, there are delicious fruits to be had from this labor. Intensive reading results in building up a strong foundation upon which faster reading with greater comprehension can occur. While intensive reading gives the students the language foundation they need, it is extensive reading that allows fluency to develop.

## Strand 4: Extensive Reading

The fourth strand is fluency development. For students to be able to read fluently, with speed and accuracy, “the reading material needs to be well within the learners’ level of proficiency” (Nation, 2008: 2). When students read huge amounts of *comprehensible* material, such as is found in graded readers, they are provided with opportunities to consolidate their previously learned language and to process (decode) the text rapidly, all the while easily *focusing on the message* and readily picking up the ideas. This type of reading does not occur when the student struggles to read an original text that is too difficult for them.

Nation (2005) asserts that “without graded readers, reading for a second language learner would be one continuous struggle against an overwhelming vocabulary level” (p. 588). Nation also says that “fluency develops when complex activities like reading are made less complex by the fluent mastery of some of the sub-skills involved in the activity” (2008: 65).

The purpose of extensive reading is not to spend a lot of time working out the meaning of unfamiliar grammatical structures and new vocabulary. Rather, the purpose is to proceed quickly through the text with a high level of comprehension so that the reading experience is pleasurable. Learners are not reading fluently when they are writing glosses and notes in the margins of the texts and when they keep getting out their dictionaries. That is an indication that they are “bogged down in the decoding of the linguistic puzzle” (Waring, 1997), i.e., engaged in the *intensive* reading process.

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In order for extensive reading to be fluent, the lexical load must be such that the reader is no longer engaged in working hard at decoding and deciphering the text. Instead, she is focused on the story itself, comprehending virtually everything, and, hopefully, enjoying it. By reading fluently at or slightly below her proficiency level, the student can consolidate her previously learned language, reinforcing language learned in her intensive reading sessions. In addition, she can gradually broaden her knowledge of previously learned language. Bell (1998) feels that because of the regular and sufficient repetition of language forms, “students automatically receive the necessary reinforcement and recycling of language required to ensure that new input is retained” (p. 3).

Vital to the ability to comprehend fully is an adequate vocabulary. Hu & Nation (2000) have established that L2 readers reach a point at which reading comprehension is almost total and the reading process becomes “pleasurable,” i.e., not a struggle, when not more than one word in fifty is unknown. This means that 98% of the running words on the page are known. This seems like a rather high percentage. However, imagine a novel, for instance, that has about ten words per line and perhaps forty lines per page. At 98%, there might be eight words

per page that are unknown to the reader, requiring the reader either to tolerate them and keep on reading, slow down in an attempt to guess their meaning, or stop altogether and resort to using a dictionary.

Contrast this with an unsimplified novel. It is possible that anywhere from 8% to 20% of the running words on the page are unknown to a student who has a vocabulary of about 2,000 word families. That means that almost every line of text has one, and possibly two, new words. A study by Horst (2005) showed that in the initial 3,000 running words (about nine pages) of an unabridged version of *Treasure Island*, there were 145 words that did not occur in the 2,000 most frequent word families of English (West, 1953) or in the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000). Here is a small sample of some of these infrequent words:

admiral alarmed awaited beach briskly  
buccaneer connoisseur cove dreadful  
effectual fawning filthy  
frost glared grumbling  
horn incivility insist  
lingering magistrate  
mingled oath parlor  
peering pigtail rebuff  
ruffian scoundrel skipper snort strode surf  
tarry threshold tottering tyrannized villainous (pp. 369–370)

Compare these to the list of words of the simplified version published by Oxford. This version uses a headword list of 1,400 word families. Horst (2005) reported that the number of words which occurs outside the 2,000 word list in the first 3,000 running words is a mere eleven (about one new word per page):

admiral ail anchor cabin crew crutch knelt  
mate pirate rum squire (p. 370)

Most reading experts would agree that fluent reading requires that students read rapidly for comprehension by recognizing words rapidly and automatically (relying on a large vocabulary base). Fluent readers can easily integrate information in the text with their own knowledge and engage in metacognitive activities, such as being aware of the purpose for reading and being able to use strategies to monitor comprehension. At higher levels of comprehension, students are more able to engage in

critical thinking about the text (analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the new information).

In order to achieve fluency, Nation (2008) and others strongly advise making extensive reading an important part of in-class and out-of-class practice. It is a truism that students become better readers by reading a lot. Day and Bamford (1998) emphasize that extensive reading is characterized by a large quantity of reading of a variety of texts that students select themselves, enjoy reading, and can read at a reasonably fluent speed. Nation (2008) is explicit as to the quantity of extensive reading that a student should engage in. “This quantity of input needs to be close to 500,000 running words per year, which is equivalent to 25 graded readers a year, or one and a half substantial first year university text books, or six unsimplified novels” (p. 50).

## Graded Readers

Though Nation (2008) mentions unsimplified

texts for comparison purposes, he strongly favors using graded readers with English language learners. Insofar as the optimal vocabulary density is 98%, or even 99% for adequate

comprehension, it is “essential that [L2 learners] read graded readers that have been specially prepared for learners of English. It is only by reading such texts that learners can have the density of known words that is essential for extensive reading” (Nation, 2008: 51).

One can measure students’ receptive vocabulary knowledge by testing them on their knowledge of the most frequent 2,000 words of English. One way of doing this is to use a test developed by Schmitt, Schmitt and Clapham (2001), or by using bilingual vocabulary tests such as can be found in Paul Nation’s Vocabulary Resource Booklet at <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation/nation.aspx>.

The success of any extensive reading program depends on the learners’ being motivated. Since teachers’ ideas of what is interesting can be quite at odds with what students think is interesting, it is imperative that students be allowed to have a voice in the choice of their own reading materials. When the emphasis is on the pleasurable reading of a great

***Even without a well-developed vocabulary, fluent reading can take place with a graded reader.***

quantity of material, it is vital that the reading process not be bogged down with “elaborate reading comprehension tests or exercises on the books they read” (Nation, 2008: 53). It should suffice for students to fill out a simple form, listing the title of the book, its level, how many pages it contains, and how long it took to read it. In addition, there can be a brief comment on something they found interesting in the book.

While Nation highly recommends graded readers, some ESL instructors recoil at the idea of using them. Critics of poorly-written graded readers see these readers as being “inauthentic, watered-down versions of richer original texts” (Nation, 2008: 57). Because of vocabulary limitations, grammatical structuring suffers, so that “what could be neatly expressed in one word is now expressed in several simpler words” (Nation, 2008: 57). It is true that in the early days of graded readers, connectives between sentences were deleted in an effort to shorten the texts, thus resulting in a lack of cohesiveness. Ironically, this simplification often resulted in a text that was more difficult to comprehend (Crossly, McCarthy, Louwse & McNamara, 2007).

Compared to the lack of a few transition words, however, the heavy lexical load of an original text vastly overpowers the student and adds immensely to the difficulty she has in comprehending. An original text, with complex syntax, sophisticated grammar, and a high percentage of low-frequency words forces the student to stop reading fluently and switch to an intensive reading mode. The great deal of effort that intensive reading requires largely precludes the possibility that she will do a great deal of reading. Original novels, therefore, are generally poor choices for fluent reading practice.

A study by Bell (2001) clearly shows that “subjects exposed to ‘extensive’ reading achieved both significantly faster reading speeds and significantly higher scores on measures of reading comprehension” than subjects who were limited to “intensive’ reading, this despite the fact that the intensive group were “faster readers at the start of the program.” Because the texts chosen for the extensive reading experiment were graded readers, Bell recommends that “reading speed will develop rapidly if learners are motivated to read interesting graded readers that are accessible linguistically.”

Luckily, as Day and Bamford (1998) point out,

there are many high quality graded readers on the market today. Many new titles coming out are not simplifications, but original, authentic language-learner literature. Modern authors are sensitive to the need to avoid stilted, unnatural language. Moreover, the argument that a simplified novel is not authentic does not entirely hold up. If a novel written by a native speaker is authentic, is not a simplified novel written by a native speaker authentic?

In the case of the unsimplified version, the writer most likely had a specific target audience in mind: other native speakers. In the case of the graded reader, the author also has a specific target audience in mind: the language learner. Perhaps it would be better to refer to these two types of books as “original” and “simplified,” rather than classify one as authentic and the other inauthentic.

## Conclusion

University-bound ESL students need to attain both a high degree of reading fluency and a high level of comprehension in their reading. Gone are the days of programs that focus exclusively on the intensive examination of texts for language-building, or, at the other end of the spectrum, the whole-language approach that floods the student with language that is over their heads, in hopes that as it washes over them, some of it will soak in.

For fluency to develop takes more than just extensive exposure to comprehensible input. Every day students need to work hard, very hard, doing intensive reading of academic texts that are rich in new vocabulary and grammatical structures. Day by day the students will build up their reading muscles, much the way an athlete goes to the gym for a workout. Similarly, when they hit the graded readers, they are like athletes set loose on the track. They will run like the wind.

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