

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 746

FL 020 469

AUTHOR Wallace, Catherine
 TITLE The Representation of Spoken Language in Early Reading Books: Problems for L2 Learner Readers.
 PUB DATE 87
 NOTE 20p.; In: Written Language: British Studies in Applied Linguistics 2. Papers from the Annual Meeting of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (Reading, England, September 1986); see FL 020 460.
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports -- Descriptive (141)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Books; *Early Reading; Foreign Countries; *Grammar; Language Research; *Oral Language; Second Language Learning; *Written Language

ABSTRACT

Some of the difficulties faced by second language learners who are continuing to acquire English at the same time as they start to read simple extended English texts are illustrated. Specific focus is on the question of how writers of early reading material can best help such learners to understand the relationship between spoken and written language; i.e., what kinds of written texts, in terms of the selection of particular stylistic features and the selection of a genre, most readily guide early second language learners into the new medium. Extracts are used from written texts, some of which are part of reading schemes for children, some written for older remedial learners, and some produced by adult learners themselves as part of a language experience approach. Key textual features are classified as reference, colloquial usage, non-standard forms, and as contracted forms. Sample transcripts of several learner readers are included. Contains 11 references. (LB)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

THE REPRESENTATION OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE IN EARLY READING BOOKS: PROBLEMS FOR L2 LEARNER READERS

Catherine Wallace
Ealing College of Higher Education

Introduction

My aim in this paper is to illustrate some of the difficulties faced by second language learners who are continuing to acquire English at the same time as they start to read simple extended English texts. The question that I shall particularly address is: how can writers of early reading material best help such learners to understand the relationship between spoken and written language; in other words what kinds of written texts in terms of the selection of particular stylistic features and the selection of a genre, most readily guide early L2 learners into the new medium? I shall use as illustrative data extracts from written texts, some of which are part of reading schemes for children, some written for older so-called remedial learners and some produced by adult learners themselves as part of a 'language experience' approach. I shall also refer to transcripts of several learner readers. (See pages 146 to 152.)

In talking of routes to reading - for either L1 or L2 learners - one has tended to come across two opposing views, which, even if not explicitly stated, emerge in certain materials and methodology. One view has it that written language closest stylistically to the learner's typical speech offers the best support for early reading, it is more readily predicted as being in the learner's own speech repertoire. Such a view would seem to be represented in text extracts one and two taken respectively from a reading book in the Nippers series, and one produced, with adult learners in mind, by the Gatehouse Project.

Extract One

We stopped here summertime
Picked your peas summertime'.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- 145
?
- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
 - Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Schoen
Hawkins

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

FL 020 469

said Ma.
'Its winter now', said the farmer.
'Got nowhere to go wintertime'
Pa said, 'Chucked off the
airfield.'

Nippers, Christmas is a Baby

Extract Two

And when it gets to you,
if you can't read it
he just says,
'Right, forget about you.
Go over to the next one'
And, you know he's going along,
and say there's somebody
else like you,
he just says
'Forget about you'
and goes over to the next one.

Gatehouse, A good life, by Alan¹

A view is principle opposed to written texts which are like speaking has been put forward by those who emphasise the autonomy of writing and speaking both formally and functionally (cf for example Stubbs 1980). Writing and speaking are, it is claimed, partly independent systems; writing is not dependent upon speaking. A pedagogic implication would seem to be that learner readers, rather than being invited to respond to written language as what they might typically say or hear day to day should be encouraged to see from the beginning that written language is different from speech. Goodman and Green (1977) note: 'Children expect what they find in written language to differ from what they would normally say'. Smith (1977) mentions this awareness (ie that speaking and writing are different) as one of the fundamental insights which children require before they can learn to read at all.

So, assuming that we agree with Smith (1978) that a teacher's role is to 'make reading easy', where does this leave teachers or writers of early

reading materials? If we resist writing which is 'like speaking', are we therefore thrown back on the kind of pseudo texts or 'readerese' typified by the much maligned Ladybird books to which the Nippers series, with its supposedly more natural language was an understandable reaction?

My own interest in the language of early reading books arises from my observation that individual learners' reading is very variable. Superficially simple texts, as judged, for instance, by large print, short readily decodable words and short sentences may be less readable than apparently more complex texts. One text may create greater difficulty than another of supposedly the same level of readability. Moreover, it has been noted, for example by Moon (1981), that readability formulae are virtually useless for texts used in the early stages of learning to read.

I shall begin by looking at some salient stylistic features of early reading books which I have selected because they appeared to create difficulty for several of my own learners, at times in ways that I had not anticipated. More interesting than the texts themselves are the learners' responses, as represented by miscues, learner comment and an occasional total resistance to the text.

In this interaction between L2 learner and written texts, we are able to discover something about:

1. the learner's current reading and learning strategies;
2. the learner's interlanguage development
3. features of texts which obstruct learners (all learners but especially L2 learners) in the early stages of learning to read, in particular attempts to represent the kind of informal language more typical of speech.

It is the third of these that I shall focus on in this paper.

Subjects and data collection

The subjects I shall refer to (two briefly, one in much more detail) are three young learners:

1. Sarla was aged 11 at the time. She had been in Britain for six years, was Gujerati speaking and beginning to learn to read in Gujerati. I taught her once a week for one term in her own school, where she was withdrawn for extra reading.
2. Yasmeen was 19, Urdu speaking from Pakistan and literate in Urdu. She had been in Britain for about a year at the start of my lessons with her. I taught her as part of a small literacy group for one academic year.
3. Amna is now 19, like Yasmeen an Urdu speaking Pakistani, but, unlike her, with minimal Urdu literacy and no experience of school before arriving at a local Further Education Centre after a year in Britain. Her spoken English is much more restricted than either Sarla or Yasmeen's and last September she was a total beginner to reading in English.

Amna was an interesting learner in that she continually commented on the structure and content of what we read together. Because of her readiness to engage with the text in this way, offering insights into the learning to read process not always so readily available to teachers, and because we simply had much more time together in a one to one teaching situation, most of the data will refer to her. Nearly all the sessions with each learner were taped beyond the very earliest and it is these transcripts that I shall refer to, together with the texts which we used. (See appendix for transcripts.)

For the purpose of this paper I shall classify key textual features as follows:

1. Reference
2. Colloquial usage
3. Non-standard forms
4. Contracted forms

1. Reference

Transcript 1 (Tom's accident) shows Amna's difficulty with reference, illustrated here by the item THAT. One source of difficulty is the extended reference: THAT refers not to a thing, as something visible and concrete, a single nominal readily identifiable in the text, but to

behaviour, an event ('Tom ran into the road'). The example is similar to that quoted in Halliday and Hasan (1976).

They broke the Chinese vase

That was - valuable

versus

That was - careless

The difficulty is compounded in transcript 1, by the fact that the reference is also very remote in the text.

Transcript 2 (A woman on her own) gives extracts from a similar discussion regarding reference, here centering on the meaning of **THEY**. The difficulty may be attributable to any one or all of several factors. Firstly Amna is not yet using this form in her own speech (at least I did not note any use of it); secondly, as revealed by her concluding comment (cf 1.39/40) she seems to be aware of its exophoric situational use, but possibly not of its referring use even in speech. To quote Simons and Murphy (1986): 'The use of deictic items in written text requires different processing strategies of children (and I would argue of adults in some L2 acquisition contexts) whose language experiences are mainly oral and who are accustomed to using the physical and temporal situations to anchor deictic items'. Or the difficulty may lie in the fact that Amna has understood 'Women on their own' as 'A woman on her own' and therefore anticipates the pronoun 'she' (cf 1.32). It is likely that Amna assumes the text is here describing an individual woman, ie the story teller featured in pictures which accompany the text, rather than a class of women (ie all women on their own), not representable through illustration.

The final example of reference difficulty is more clearly to do with the problems raised by written versions of more typically spoken usage and is illustrated by the use of **YOU** in transcript 3 ('Doing my flat up'). This instance of **YOU** is exophoric, in the sense that the roles of reader and writer are invoked. While the situational use of **YOU** in spoken face to face communication is of course very familiar to Amna, the sophisticated convention by which a writer may address a reader is quite alien to Amna. This is partly because the notion of authorship is still not very

clear to her. Also, she has become familiar with the more typical endophoric use of YOU in quoted speech, typical of written narratives where YOU can be retrieved from the text as in extract 3:

Extract Three

'Red Riding Hood comes in
She says, Look Grandma
I have some cake
and some flowers for you'
(Ladybird Read it yourself, Little Red Riding Hood)

Moreover, there is inconsistency within the text 'Doing my flat up'. For on a previous page to that quoted in transcript 3 there is another use of YOU, the generalised YOU=ONE, which is also an exophoric use. Extract 4 gives this example:

Extract Four

I use wood chip paper
and paint over it,
so you see the pattern.
(Centerprise, Doing my flat up)

The difficulties would seem to be created by the genre of this kind of first person narrative, in particular where the narrator I is also the author, as in these 'True Life' stories.

It should be added that Amna is beginning to acquire the concept of reference, as evidenced by her search in the text for some backward referent for THEY in transcript 2. This seemed to be confirmed by her spontaneous comment on the item IT, later in the same text.

Extract four

I go home and get a cup of tea
I sit down and drink it
(Gatehouse, A woman on her own)

Amna's response here, sotto voce and more to herself than to me is: 'Why not write here "tea"? Why write IT? Short way. It means tea.' To sum up so far then, where the reference is accessible, it allows learners the opportunity to verbalise about the way written texts show cohesion in English, as Amna does here. Difficulty arises in early texts where there is a remoteness or looseness of reference, a problem more likely to arise in genres such as first person narratives, which come close stylistically to certain kinds of informal speech.

2. Colloquial usage

One difficulty with YOU as a direct address to the reader is that this kind of personal address is usually, in writing, reserved for letters to friends, advertising and notices addressed generally to the public. Its use in transcript 3 represents a phatic feature more characteristic of face to face informal conversation. There is at least a consistency of tone in the text 'Doing my flat up', as evidenced by other phatic features, for example, fillers such as 'as you call it', in this extract:

Extract five

I buy ten rolls of paper.
It was 75p each
Then I buy the starch,
Or paste as you call it.

(Centerprise. Doing my flat up)

This is highly unpredictable as written text and of course to Amna's query at this point 'What means "as you call it"' there is no ready answer as, if we interpret it parenthetically, it is not part of the meaning of the text at all.

We find other kinds of representations of colloquial speech in the text 'Running Man' (cf transcript 4) Sarla's difficulty with DUNNO here does not stem from her unfamiliarity with informal spoken language as such (she is a fairly fluent speaker of English) but from her unfamiliarity with the way informal speech is conventionalised in writing. Sarla's resistance

to the text here makes the point, moreover, that even really decodable words are balked at if, as Meek et al (1983) point out, the learner 'cannot make them mean'.

3. Non standard forms

The text 'Doing my flat up' also features non-standard as well as colloquial forms. Representation of both non-standard and colloquial language is found particularly in adult reading books which have followed a language experience approach, whereby the text results from the teacher, as scribe, rendering the written text so that it stays very close to the original oral version of the storyteller (the literacy student). It is likely that Alan's story (p2) resulted from this kind of process. Where the learner uses some non-standard, as well as colloquial forms of English, these may be maintained in the written version. In these learner produced books, one occasionally finds inconsistencies of forms (such as start v started and knew v knowed) within the same text. This presumably reflects variation within the learner's language system, and is consistent with a generally higher degree of variability in spoken language. Amna responded to the text in extract 6 by rendering it as it stood. Though this text was produced by a non-standard rather than a non-native speaker of English it may have matched quite closely Amna's own current interlanguage:

Extract six

I buy a can of putty
For fill the holes
My brother give me
Some brushes
So I never buy them

(Centerprise, Doing my flat up)

I also asked the seven-year-old sitting with us at the time (an Indian girl, with dominant English and a fluent young reader) to read aloud the same page, and, as I had expected, she translated it into standard. It seems that, just as non-standard or interlanguage speakers when reading fluently read standard texts in their own dialect or interlanguage (as discussed for

instance by Wallace 1986), standard speakers are likely to read non-standard forms in standard.

4. Contracted forms

The use of contracted forms is clearly consistent with a writer's decision to attempt a representation of spoken language in writing. One notes, however, frequent resistance on the part of learners to these forms, as illustrated in transcript 5 (Maria's trip through the system) where Yasmeeen tends to fill out the structure (eg we'll - we will, line 4; I've - I have, line 9; I'm - I am, line 13). Alternatively she temporarily reveals a loss of sense of the text, by falling back on a decoding strategy to produce I - VE (to rhyme with IVY, line 16). Incidentally, Amna at one point decoded the contracted form of 'you have' in a similar way, ie as you - VE ('You - ve made me wet'). In her case it is likely that her English language competence was not sufficiently developed to allow her to recognise an underlying perfect form. Yasmeeen, in giving the full form, displays a greater competence here. Research on L2 acquisition (cf for example Ellis 1986) suggests that full forms are typically acquired before contracted forms and this may well be one source of difficulty for L2 learners of the written representation of contracted forms.

Conclusion

I should like to make a few concluding comments under each of the headings discussed in this paper:

1. **Reference.** Reference needs to be accessible in texts for early L2 learner readers, so that items refer unambiguously to specific nominals readily retrievable from the text. We have seen that anaphora can create difficulty if there is a lengthy stretch of text before the pro-form occurs. An early reader simply cannot keep very much in short term memory. If the reference is accessible, learners, with a little guidance, are able to discover this cohesive feature of texts through reading itself.

2. **Colloquial usage.** There are several difficulties with writers' attempts to convey colloquial style in writing. Firstly such attempts, as exemplified by the case of DUNNO (transcript 4) result in highly stylised language which is likely to be obstructive to early learners who are still coming to terms with more typical forms of written language. Secondly, the very early learner reading in 'reading aloud' style with little of the pace or rhythm of informal speech will make little sense of writers' attempts to characterise spoken usage, such as the use of phatic markers or asides. It needs a skilled reader who will first survey the text to decide on an appropriate oral delivery for texts such as:

Then I buy the starch
Or paste as you call it

(Centerprise, Doing my flat up)

3. **Non-standard texts.** The arguments against the use of non-standard language in early reading texts, even where the particular non-standard features are familiar to the L2 learner, are similar to those against the use of colloquial style. Firstly, it is hard to decide on a consistent orthography when attempting to represent essentially spoken varieties of language (cf for instance Roxy Harris (1979) who notes the absence of a definitive written form for Creole English.)

Secondly, non-standard forms are not usually found in other written media with which the reader may already be familiar, such as simple notices or advertisements. Finally, as argued in this paper, there is the reader's likely existing expectation, established from even minimal experience of print, that written language is not like speaking. Thus, while in the longer term there is a strong case for legitimising forms of language other than standard in the classroom, there is, I would argue, also a case for avoiding non-standard and colloquial usage in texts for very early learner readers.

4. **Contracted forms.** Contracted forms are hard to avoid once dialogue is introduced. One would simply argue for consistency, with the higher frequency items, in the spoken medium, such as

'don't' and 'didn't' being introduced before those such as 'I've' which appear to create greater difficulty for L2 learners.

Overall, difficulties of selecting suitable texts can be partly resolved by choosing genres such as fables and folk or fairy tales where reference tends to be endophoric, and nominals to be repeated, and neither colloquial nor non-standard usage is part of the genre. When 'true life' biographies are used they would not necessarily lose their immediacy and credibility if they were adapted so as to make them more typically written texts, with consistent structure and greater cohesiveness.

We can help to make 'learning to read easy' by offering learners written texts which acknowledge a need to be more explicit and fully structured than situationalised spoken language is required to be; by introducing the conventions of written language, especially the use of reference in written texts, with some care and remembering that, far from offering an initial route into reading, the representation of speaking (especially informal speaking) in writing is a particularly difficult convention to grasp. All learners have to come to terms with the special characteristics of written language, a difficulty compounded for those L2 learners who are in the process of acquiring areas of target language grammar such as interrogative and past tense forms. L2 learners in particular are helped by fully structured texts which make salient features of English syntax more 'visible' and therefore more readily commented on or queried. Such texts support and extend a developing linguistic competence and awareness, ultimately allowing L2 learners the opportunity to extend their own stylistic repertory, especially if most of their access to English has been in informal face-to-face situations.

Notes

1. A good life is one of a series of books written by as well as for people who have reading and writing difficulties.

Transcript 1: Tom's accident

Text:

But Tom did not see him and ran into the road. A truck was coming. "Come back, Tom", cried Ann. Tom ran on. But he slipped and fell. The truck driver braked hard. The policeman stopped the traffic and ran to Tom. "That was a very silly thing to do" the policeman said.

Amna

CW

1. The policeman-policeman s-it ‡
2. stopped stopped the ter-traffic
3. and rode to Tom

STOPPED

What did he do?

4. and ran to Tom
5. T...‡ was a ver ‡-sill-s-lip ‡
- 6.
- 7.
8. *Yeh*
9. children - no .T...
- 10.

THAT - VERY - SILLY
You know what 'silly'
means - stupid?

Well read the next
bit. What's that?

- 11.to ...d - d

D-O

- 12.*I don't know*
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.

DO
So what fits in here?
'That was a very
silly --- to do'

- 16.*I don't know*
- 17.
- 18.
- 19.*Girl?*
- 20.
- 21.
- 22.

If you do something silly, what
does your sister say. 'That
was a very silly --- to do.'

Not a very silly girl to do.
'Now that was a very silly --
THING

23. *thing*
24.

That was a very silly thing
to do'

25. *thing miss. Miss this one thing?*
26. *Oh. Thing means? This thing*
(pointing to object in room)

That word is 'thing' yes

27. *this one no thing* (indicating text)

Well ... yeh.

Transcript 2: A woman on her own

Text:

Women on their own cannot really have a life because of the world. When they do get a chance to go out, people think they are going out just for men. But they are not really going out for men. They get tired sitting in the house. They get very depressed and frightened. They want to go out for company.

Amna

CW

1. Women on their own ca... cannot
2. really have a life because of the
3. wild world when their-them
4. world'
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
8. them?
- 9.

CANNOT REALLY

WORLD because of the

- Lets go back a bit. It says here: women can't have a good life because of the way the world is. When - carry on: when --- do ...

10. when --- do get a chance

CHANCE

11. *I don't know this one*

12. *they*

13.

14.

15. *they means?*

16.

17.

19. *child-life*

20.

21. *her husband?*

22.

23.

24.

25.

26. *they means 'people'?*

27.

28.

29.

30.

31.

32. *She?*

33.

34.

35. *She telling all women?*

36.

37.

38. *Yeh 'they' means 'nother woman*

39. *'they' means this one (she points*

40. *outside to children in playground)*

41. *the children*

42.

43.

44.

Its THEY

**you know what 'they' means
don't you? When they do get
a chance ...**

**You don't know what 'they'
means? Who are they? Who
are we talking about?**

**It says 'women on their own
have a hard life' ...**

**... 'when they do get a chance
to go out people think they
are going out just for men'
they ...**

**Not just people in general.
Women, it means women.
Women—women on their own
with children. ... So who are
we talking about?**

**They not she. It's they It
means all women.
She's talking about all
women, all women who live
on their own.**

**Yes we can say they are
playing**

**Yes the children or women or
other people together. So
she's talking about women
on their own.**

Transcript 3: Doing my flat up

Text:

I paint the ceiling

You should see me

Amna

CW

1. I paint - I paint the

2.

3.

4. I paint the ceiling

5. you ... said ... †

6.

7. you should see me

(repeat, 'you should see me')

8. *Who telling?*

9. *Who's she - no who's she telling*

10. *'your should' - this is 'your'?*

11. *'You should see me'*

12. *Then who see her*

13. *yeh ...*

14.

15.

16. *Yeh, nobody here then who*

17. *talk to her?*

18.

19.

20.

What's she painting? Look at the picture. What's this?

CEILING

SHOULD

you should

Who's ?...?

You

Yes. Who's she talking to?

Well, she's talking to you the reader - I think. Do you think that's strange?

That's right. Who's talking to her? She's the writer. She's writing the story for you. She's talking to you.

Transcript 4: Running Man

Text:

On Sunday morning, Mrs Crooks shouts across the fence. "My Tom is proper peaky this morning. Dunno what they were doing at Nick Hardy's last night." "Funny", says Mum. "Harry looks a bit off colour, too." Harry thinks it will be a long time before he watches another ghost film on telly.

Sarla

CW

1. On Sunday morning Mrs Crooks shouts
2. across the fence
3. My Tom is proper p... † this morning PEAKY - it means very ill
4. Dun... dun... † what they were DUNNO, another way of
5. doing at Nick Hardy's saying 'I don't know'
6. Funny, Harry looks a bit off colour too
7. Harry thinks it will be a long time
8. before he watch another ghost film on tele

Transcript 5: Maria's trip through the system

Text:

So they said, "Come back in three weeks' time when we know the results of the tests. Then we'll soon find you a job." She said she's still trying for the college. After, I went into hospital. I've been going to hospital ever since I was three months. I'm eighteen now. I've got Thalassaemia. Thalassaemia is - I've got too many white cells and not enough red cells in my blood.

Yasmeen

CW

1. So they said
2. Come back in three weeks' time
3. When we know the results of the tests
4. Then we will soon find you a job
5. She said she's still trying for the college

6. *What's 'trying'?*

Well, I think it means she's trying to get to college

7.

8. After, I went into hospital

9. I have been going to hospital

10. ver in since ‡ I was three months

EVER SINCE, so she's been going to hospital since she was three months old.

11.

12.

13. I am eighteen now

14. I have good thalassaemia

Yes, 'thalassaemia', its a strange illness of the blood.

15.

16. I-VE got too many white cells

ENOUGH

17. and not ... ‡

18. *Enough - F or G?*

It isn't spelt like that, though.

19. *Oh dear!*

20.

21. *blood*

She's got too many white cells
and not enough red cells in my
...?

Notes on the transcription

‡	indicates an intervention from the teacher at this point
...	indicates a hesitation
-	indicates an immediate self-correction or repetition
Capitals	indicate that a word or phrase is provided by the teacher
Word italicised	indicates a student's response or comment
- - -	indicates that a word is omitted
Bold type	indicates emphasis

Bibliography

ELLIS R. The effects of linguistic environment on the second language acquisition of grammatical rules. Paper read at BAAL Annual General Meeting (1986)

GOODMAN Y and J Green. Grammar and reading in the classroom. In Shuy (ed) Linguistic theory: what can it say about reading? International Reading Association (1986)

HALLIDAY MAK and Hasan Ruquaya. Cohesion in English. Longman (1976)

HARRIS R. Caribbean English and adult literacy. Adult Literacy Unit (1979)

MEEK M with S Armstrong, V Austerfield, J Graham and E Plackett. Achieving literacy: longitudinal studies of adolescents learning to read. Routledge and Kegan Paul (1983)

MOON C. Identification of readability factors. In J Chapman (ed) The reader and the text. Heinemann Educational Books (1981)

SIMONS H and Sandra Murphy. Spoken language strategies and reading acquisition. In J Cook-Gumperz (ed) The social construction of literacy. Cambridge University Press (1986)

SMITH F. Making sense of reading. Harvard Educational Review, vol 47, 1977, pp 286-395

SMITH F. Reading. Cambridge University Press (1978)

STUBBS M. Language and literacy: the sociolinguistics of reading and writing. Routledge and Kegan Paul (1980)

WALLACE C. Learning to read in a multicultural society. Pergamon Press (1986)

Texts referred to in the extracts and transcripts

Nippers, Christmas is a baby, by Geraldine Kaye

Gatehouse, A good life, by Alan

Breakthrough, Tom's accident, by David Mackay

Gatehouse, A woman on her own, by Margaret Fulcher

Centerprise, Doing my flat up, by Dalcy Edwards

Crown Street Kings, Running man part 2, by Ann Oates

Centerprise, Maria's trip through the system, by Maria Yianni

Ladybird, Red Riding Hood, adapted by Fran Hunia