

Some Comments on Readability and Writing Readable USP Extension Courses

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Readability has been defined as “those aspects of a text which make it easy (or hard) for a reader to understand, e.g. legibility, illustration, colour, vocabulary, conceptual difficulty, syntax and organisation of content” (Gilmore and Wagner, 1986: 5-6). For course writers, the ‘text characteristics’ of most concern are the last four, which can be categorised further into word and sentence variables. “Studies over the years have suggested and still suggest that the two variables of word difficulty and sentence difficulty account for most of the variance in reliability measurement” (Klare, 1976: 143). Klare goes on to list some of these word and sentence difficulty variables as follows:

Some Word Difficult Variables

1. Proportion of content (vs function) words
2. Content word qualities
 - a. Frequency
 - b. Familiarity
 - c. Length
3. Concreteness vs abstractness
4. Association-value
5. Active vs nominalized verb constructions

Some Sentence Difficulty Variables

1. Length (esp. clause length)
2. Active vs passive
3. Affirmative vs negative
4. Embedded vs non-embedded
5. Low depth vs high depth

Two more sentence variables can be added to this list:

6. The degree to which relationships are developed intra- and inter-sententially.
7. The extent that ‘gapping’ (the intentional or accidental omission of information) has occurred within the text (Chambers, 1983: 11).

Implications of some word and sentence variables for writing

This paper will focus briefly and in particular on word variables 2, 3 and 4, and sentence variables 1-4 and 7 as those that either appear to be potentially problematic for USP course writers, or require to be brought to the attention of those teaching through the print mode. In an unpublished readability survey of some USP extension course materials (Tuimalealiifano, 1985), content words or technical jargon were found to be a major cause of reading difficulty for USP extension students. Much of the jargon used in the courses under survey (and probably in most other USP extension courses) was highly abstract in nature, in that it represented new content-related concepts that students were expected to be or become familiar with. USP course writers would agree with Nelson (1978) that these words "represent the very substance of the subject the teachers are trying to teach" (Nelson: 623-624). She goes on to caution, however, that "subject area textbooks are *not* designed for independent reading" and that "the best way to enhance reading comprehension in your subject area is to provide the kind of instruction which *prepares* students for the reading assignment, *guides* them in their reading and *reinforces* the new ideas through rereading and discussion" (Nelson: 625, my italics).

Because USP course writers are writing for second language learners in a Pacific context, the choice of words for their association value (connotation/denotation) must take on a new significance. Words with a western (or foreign) culture orientation, either in a course text or in written materials must not be expected to work for USP students, particularly those working independently, at a distance, divorced from a face-to-face context where a further verbal explanation can be sought.

With regard to sentence variables, the long sentence has been found to correlate highly with reading difficulty and a high degree of abstraction. A high level of embedding can also inhibit the flow of meaning in a sentence. Fry (1977) summarises this in his 'Kernel Distance Theory' where the distance between the noun and the verb (the kernel of the sentence) makes the sentence more difficult than does the distance outside of the kernel. Keeping the kernel together as much as possible, therefore, and not allowing too much embedding between subject and verb will not only reduce the sentence length but allow a clearer flow of meaning.

Because the successful distance education course has been associated in part with a personalised writing style achieved through keeping the roles of teacher and student, and the activity associated with each, clearly defined, it is easy to see how the active rather than the passive voice makes for clarity of message. This, plus presentation in a predominantly affirmative or positive style lends much to readable writing.

The significance of the reader

Apart from text characteristics, a discussion of readability factors must include 'reader characteristics or attributes' that determine how well (or not) a text is received by the reader.

These essentially involve the interest and motivational level of the reader and his/her language competence and background. Klare suggests that "motivation can sometimes override the effect of readability upon comprehension" where it has a chance to operate (p. 140) and that difficult subject matter will not pose a problem if it is something students are interested in and/or have sufficient background knowledge of (p.146). The degree to which writers can use the technique of 'gapping' (see sentence variable no. 7) successfully depends on how well equipped the students are with appropriate background knowledge. Writing that runs over too much 'old ground' is not only a waste of time for the author but may result in boredom on the part of the reader and consequently a drop in the readability rating of the text. However, writers are cautioned that this background knowledge must be *known*, not *assumed*, before it can be used to advantage.

With regard to the interest that USP students bring to their study, it must be kept in mind that because of limited job opportunities in this part of the world, many students are in jobs (or in training for jobs) that are available and are not necessarily of their choice or interest. It is likely therefore, that although highly motivated to pass a course, the student may not be as interested in the subject area as would be expected. This consideration must be reflected in the course writer's writing and extra effort must be put into making the subject interesting.

Concluding comments

Having singled out the factors inherent in both text and reader that make

for readability, the question is how to use the information to produce readable writing. Gunning (1968) recommends the 'reader-centred' approach.

First, say to yourself, 'To whom am I writing and what would I say?' No one could pretend that he could write well if he didn't know *to whom* he was writing and *what* he wanted to say... Second, notice the number of lines you write... It is not the consciously written long sentence that causes trouble, it is the unconsciously written long one... Third, question every word you are tempted to use... There is room for the necessarily long word if you get rid of those that are unnecessary (Gunning, pp. 42-43).

Only when a writer develops "a greater awareness of the readability of the written materials used in adult education" and makes "a concentrated effort to match the readability of the materials with the reader's skill", can there be "increasing acceptance of reading as a primary or auxiliary method of instruction" (Abram, 1981: 31). Reading has already been accepted as a prime medium of instruction for many thousands of USP extension students. A great effort must now be put into becoming aware of how well we are using this medium for teaching and whether we are producing readable course materials.

Readability is therefore the end product of a conscious effort to keep reader and reading material on the same wavelength. More than just that, it is "excitement, familiarity (unfamiliar ideas explained in familiar terms) clarity (low percentage of abstract words), visibility, a good book!" (Blair, 1971: 443).

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