The text dead or alive: Expanding textual repertoires in the adult ESOL

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Abstract

The paper explores the manner in which written texts are selected and used in the adult ESOL classroom. Taking a sociocultural view of the reading process and of the nature of text, it argues that ESOL students have potentially rich textual resources which are typically not acknowledged in the classroom: in particular, the textual options embodied by the published textbook or the worksheet do not do justice to the rich and diverse textual worlds which adult ESOL learners inhabit. Drawing on Goffman's notion of 'authoring', the paper argues that ESOL students can be encouraged to reposition themselves as expert interpreters of classroom texts rather than passive consumers. Reading can be seen as the creation of new texts, as the interpreters rearticulate orthodox textual meaning to their own ends, in shared talk around the text. By way of illustration, two Adult ESOL classrooms are focused on which demonstrate contrasting ways in which texts are selected and exploited in the ESOL classroom. In addition, some views of students themselves are also discussed The paper concludes by proposing that classroom texts be seen by teachers and students as opportunities for textual authoring, where what is brought to texts is as important as any specific linguistic or content knowledge derived from them.

Introduction:

Our lives are made up of texts. They are woven into the stories we tell to make sense of everyday experiences. Harste Woodward and Burke (1984) call these 'literacy stories'. I begin with an example of my own.

The setting is London on the Underground the day after the July 7th bombings in 2005. Many of my fellow passengers are reading books and newspapers. The young woman sitting opposite me, wearing a headscarf is very intensely reading the Koran. This is not uncommon but on this occasion the subvocalisation is noticeably louder than usual, the intensity of the reader's concentration on her text more striking. In the context of the previous day's events it becomes for me a salient and poignant act.

Many Londoners who daily make journeys like mine will be travelling to ESOL classes, where, I want to argue in this paper, their rich and complex experiences of texts and reading, their 'literacy stories', will be barely acknowledged; their textual worlds will be circumscribed, closed down rather than enriched.

My discussion will centre around the role of the text in ESOL literacy learning, taking ESOL classes to be those attended by adults who arrive in the United Kingdom expecting to settle there for the medium to long term. They may be refugees, asylum seekers or economic migrants from the new Europe, particularly since the expansion of the European Union. While my discussion is centred in urban Britain, specifically in London, I hope that some of the issues raised here will resonate with those working in other English speaking countries which become home to newcomers from ever more diverse backgrounds.

Literacy is socially constructed within the discursive practices of everyday life (cf. Barton 1994, Baynham 1995, Street 1984). Mediating in literacy practices are texts of all kinds, whose significance takes on new meaning in context 'Whenever we read a book – we might add here any other kind of text - we recontextualise what we read and add or change meanings.' (Blommaert 2005:46) My literacy story quoted above is perhaps an example of this kind of recontextualization. In the classroom, however, this tends not to happen: learners are typically required to respond with 'correct' responses to classroom texts, whose forms and meanings remain fixed, unyielding to new inflections or resonances. How might we then reconfigure our notion of text in the classroom – as the physical resource which mediates learning - so that it becomes a dynamic, living organism which takes on new life in the process of its interpretation? I draw on Goffman's notion of author (Goffman 1981) to characterise how texts can be recreated by readers rather than simply being reproduced or, in Goffman's terms, 'animated'. Only as authors are students able as Widdowson, (1992), who also follows Goffman's characterisation, puts it 'to provide an interpretation', to 're-author' texts in the light of the ever-changing circumstances in which they are encountered and made sense of.

In spite of the sociocultural and sociopolitical emphasis in international literacy studies (cf eg Prinsloo and Brier 1996, Auerbach 1992), current research in the UK has continued to take a predominantly skills based approach to reading instruction, through which elements of reading and texts are presented to learners sequentially and hierarchically. This is partly attributable to a territorial divide by which anthropologists and social theorists talk of literacy, often in out of school environments, while cognitive psychologists lay claim to expertise in the micro processes of reading itself. I argue that this is a false divide: reading, as the

construction of meaning from text, is inherently a social process as much as it is part of wider sociocultural practice (cf. Baynham 1995). It follows that classrooms as social communities can serve as arenas for the re-authoring of text which is both a social, cognitive and indeed critical process (cf. Wallace 2003).

Adult ESOL practice in the U.K. has tended to favour the skills orientation, drawing strongly on the framework provided by the British National Literacy Strategy for schools where reading is divided up into word, sentence and text level processing (cf. for example . Brooks et al 2003), although the new Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (2001) has, unlike the Literacy Strategy, privileged text over sentence and word in its organisation. An accompanying pedagogic concern embedded in the new Adult Curriculum is the relationship between what are commonly known as the 'four language skills' – that is reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Here I would like to sidestep these orthodox preoccupations to ask more fundamentally: What is reading *for* in the case of new arrivals in Britain for whom English is a second language ? Is reading part of language learning, an apprenticeship for further academic study, preparation for citizenship, or an opportunity to access the dominant or mainstream culture? Does it have a pleasurable or aesthetic dimension? And do the views of teachers align themselves with what adult ESOL learners themselves think reading is for? Closely linked to the question: 'What is reading for' is the question 'what are t*exts* for'? In addressing these questions., I shall focus on two Adult ESOL classrooms, one observed as part of the ESOL Effective Practice Project, while a second makes reference to an earlier Case Studies project (Cooke and Wallace 2003). I shall refer to the first class as Class A, whose teacher is Milly while the teacher in Class B, studied as part of the Case Studies project, will be known as Anthony.

The second-language reader: a deficit or resource orientation?

A common discourse in the contemporary reading debates is problem oriented. There is a powerful ideology centred around reading 'difficulty' –what learners, whether first or second language learners, *cannot* do. Moreover learner inadequacy is seen to be attributable not to circumstance but to cognitive or – in the case of second language learners in particular – linguistic deficit. In

classification of reader types, the second language reader is often assigned to the space or box on the diagram allocated to problem readers, for instance, those who can decode but 'have no language comprehension'. Adult ESOL learners occupy a marginal space in mainstream theorising, much as many EAL (English as an additional language) children are marginalised in classrooms and schools (West 2001). I wish to argue here that difference is too readily equated with difficulty in the reading debates; that in concerns with reader deficiencies we lose sight of the major questions: What is reading for? and 'What are texts for? In keeping these major questions in sight, we are better able to tap into the considerable life experiences of adult learners, building on strengths rather than identifying weaknesses.

Even where the ESOL learner has had little or no schooling she/he brings valuable life experiences to bear in the new setting. Amna, a learner I studied for a period of eighteen months in both a one-to one and whole class setting(cf. Wallace 1990) was a 19 year old second language learner from Pakistan. She had lived in Britain for about eighteen months but had never been to school until she came to the local Further Education college. Amna's progress in reading was slow and she struggled to master the decoding level of reading - indeed she was seen by some colleagues to be a learner who might have specific learning difficulties. However. Amna showed she could offer astute observations on text, and from early on in our lessons metalinguistic comments of some sophistication as we see from this example:

> *I go home and get a cup of tea*
> *I sit down and drink it*
> *Why not write here 'tea'? Why write 'it'? Short way. 'It' means 'tea'*
> *(Wallace 1990)*

It is important to emphasise that Amna had learnt the principle of deictic reference from the text itself. The text had taught her, not her teacher. We see Amna spontaneously interrogating the text with the intention of trying to make sense of the manner in which reference works in written language. Amna constantly challenged both the language and content of texts largely, I surmise, because she had not been cowed into submission to the text through schooling. Thus at one point she responded to the quaint language of a story which talks of the 'little man' thus: 'he no little'! For Amna texts were tools for language

learning, - about the generic and micro structure of written texts in particular - but they were also a source of bewilderment, disbelief and, occasionally, humour and pleasure.

Focus on the text

The text gets short shrift in mainstream reading ideology. As Meek puts it: ' the reading experts treat all texts as the neutral substance on which the process works' (Meek: 1988:5). The view tends to be that once word reading is well entrenched, primarily through training in phonemic awareness, the reader is set to move on to the text. What a text is and what we do with it, beyond applying to it the elusive notion of 'comprehension', is rarely made clear. Below I look more fully at what we might mean by 'text'. For the moment we can take it to mean all the material which readers work with which carries communicative meaning in context. So some single words will be texts in particular environments, such as *Danger* and *Stop* while others such as *But* or nonsense words such as *Crafe* will not. Conversely many narratives which may be part of reading schemes for beginner readers are what we might call 'pseudo texts' consisting of strings of words, selected on the basis of assumed ease of decodability, rather than having any identifiable purpose – other than to 'teach reading'. The classroom text is frequently constructed as inert, treated as an object to be consumed rather than given new life, or re-authored by readers in new settings.

Teachers' decisions of what texts to use and how to use them are closely linked to their views of what reading – and classroom reading – is for. Our overall question then in this paper is 'what are texts for'? Specific questions, related to this, are:

> What use do teachers make of texts? Are they to be reproduced or recreated? Animated or authored?
> What is pupil uptake on texts, that is how do students either spontaneously or under guidance exploit the texts made available.?
> What do pupils see as the purpose of classroom texts?
> How can teachers draw on students' resources to reposition them as expert interpreters rather than deficient in specific skills?

The text in context

The nature of texts and our reading of them is culturally variable and historically contingent. Olson (1994), talking of the history of literacy primarily in the West, notes, for instance, that in the Middle Ages, texts were seen as boundless resources from which we might take inexhaustible meanings. Gradually, through the interpretation of religious texts, in particular the Bible, attention to the literal meaning – the actual words on the page – developed. By the end of the period 'the meaning of a text is austerely anchored in the textual evidence' (Olson 1994: 144) and remained so during the period we have come to know in the West as the enlightenment and later modernist era.. One strand of contemporary debate centres around the interplay between textual meaning and authorial intentionality. The highly controversial cartoon texts depicting Mohammed, originally published by a small journal in Denmark in the autumn of 2005, were judged in part on the basis of authorial intention to cause offence. Each new contextualisation of these texts raised the stakes still higher, leading to mass demonstrations across Europe and the Middle East. That some readings may be wrenched sharply out of alignment with the author's intended reading is evidenced by the comments of Herman Hesse in an introduction to a late edition of his iconic text: Steppenwolf. Hesse says: 'Of all my books Steppenwolf is the one that was often and more violently misunderstood than any other…and frequently it is actually the affirmative and enthusiastic readers who have reacted to it oddly' (Hesse 1965)

In short, we need to see texts against an historical, institutional and immediate context (cf. Blommaert 2005). One way of assessing the text in context is through conducting text ethnographies.

Text ethnography

Ethnographic approaches offer the reading researcher investigating familiar settings a measure of detachment from situations in which they are immersed, (cf Roberts this volume, Barro et al 1993). It can be useful for classroom observers and teachers wishing to address the question 'what is the text for', to undertake mini ethnographies in order to able to stand back from their own classrooms – to 'read' their classrooms. This means reading all the textual material and practices being currently deployed as well as tracing from present evidence wider practices

and values, revealed through texts on the classroom wall and resources such as dictionaries, (mono or bilingual) and the location and use of class libraries. And just as the familiar can be made strange in classroom ethnography so can the apparently different – the strange- be made familiar, as I found when, on a visit as a consultant to a national literacy project, I was observing 14 year olds in a Singaporean classroom. They were doing sustained silent reading, a popular literacy event which has made the transition from a Western educational setting to the traditionally more structured one of the educationally highly successful Singapore. My notes read: in the classroom the children have brought in a number of texts of their choice, but students are doing a wide range of things with them. One boy has rolled his text up and is using it as some sort of target, another has a massive volume under the desk – he is 'doing reading' by very rapidly flicking over the pages, in a manner which suggests he cannot possibly be processing print. In fact few – mainly the girls - are doing what we might conventionally call 'reading', huddled together enjoying the physical contact which the joint sharing of their chosen text, in most cases popular fiction, affords.

Preceding the sustained silent reading episode had been what was perceived as the serious work of the class. This involved the shared production of a worksheet by class groups which consisted of a 'scribe' – usually a girl – copying very neatly a form of words which were very close to the teacher's input, as they did a task on fitting a plug. The textual product from each group was a large set of instructions (for that was the generic focus) on 'wiring a plug'.

The text in the classroom

'What texts enter the classroom and what is done to and with them is a political act' (Kress et al 2005). The choice and use of texts by boys and girls in the Singaporean classroom in the sustained silent reading episode, along with the deployment of girls and boys in the group work says something about gender politics. More explicit text ideology is evident in the current support in the United States for the teaching of so called 'intelligent design' in science textbooks alongside Darwinism. In the United Kingdom a Conservative government banned in 1988 a teacher training project *Language in the National Curriculum* because the texts proposed for study and analysis were not the conventional texts

of the academy. They were designed to draw attention to the social and ideological implications of language use in texts.

Most teachers in the ESOL/EFL (English to Speakers of Other Languages and English as a Foreign Language) world are dependent on the published textbook, sometimes known as the 'global EFL textbook' (cf. Gray 2002) because, though produced by the West, notably the U.S and Britain, these artefacts have global reach, finding their way from Slovenia to Taiwan as well as to ESOL classrooms in urban Britain. In the United States radical educators such as Elsa Auerbach and Nina Wallerstein have produced textbooks (most notably English for Action, 2004) specifically for immigrant groups in the North American workplace. In this textual material issues related to rights at work, safety and Trade Union membership are directly addressed. There is nothing comparable in the United Kingdom where the default classroom textbook remains Gray's 'global textbook', typically designed for foreign language students on short stay visits to the U.K. and so known generically as the 'EFL textbook'. As highly wrought, attractive products these textbooks have become as ubiquitous as magazines such as Hello or OK, which they closely resemble, in the preoccupation with celebrity and the promotion of the trivial. Strongly promoted by international publishers in the UK and North America they find their way to the unlikeliest corners of the globe, frequently when long past their sell- by- date in their original sites of production (cf . Canagarajah 1999). A Vietnamese student in one of the classes in the EEP project proudly presented her teacher with a bootleg CD of the listening activities from *Headway Elementary* which had been on sale in a Hanoi street market.

The EFL textbook is largely context- less as well as content free. French counterparts such as a popular textbook in the U.K, *Tricolor,* refer to concrete and topical aspects of contemporary French social life, such as the Salaire Minimum Interprofessionelle de Croissance (statutory minimum wage). The reader of the EFL textbook, because the text is designed to be read by an anonymous global readership, is frequently marooned in a cultural no-man's land, with few if any specific cultural reference points.

However their very remoteness from any recognisable reality may make them what we might call 'safe texts' for both global and local constituencies. Gray (2002) talks of a proscribed list of 'sensitive' topics in the global EFL textbook,

represented by the acronym PARSNIP: politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, 'isms' and pork. The texts play safe by representing an idealised world where no-one is ever unhappy, sick or poor. The overwhelming impression in the global course book is of success, good health, wealth and whiteness or what Auerbach (personal communication) calls 'happy multiculturalism'. However, the apparently well-intentioned blandness or 'safeness' of the texts disguises an ideology which presupposes, through dominant images and themes, a dedicated commitment to consumerism and the pursuit of pleasure.

The Text in the Curriculum

The ESOL Core Curriculum, as strongly genre oriented, side steps the issue of topic, focusing primarily on text types. The initial emphasis on text as the point of departure is couched in terms of a functional approach to text, where texts are evaluated in terms not of what they are about but of the job they are doing, whether narrating, reporting, explaining or arguing. Thus the very first page of instructions for Reading (Rt/E1- that is Reading: text, Entry One) instructs under 'Component skill and knowledge and understanding': *adults should learn to*: **follow a short narrative on a familiar topic or experience**. Exemplification is provided by means of a short text which has been produced about the learner by a scribe: My name is Amina. I come from Somalia'. Later in the curriculum material, learners at advanced stages of acquisition are invited to engage with a wide range of texts and sample activities are proposed of the kind: ' In small groups learners discuss a report in a newspaper of current interest, eg cloning or GM foods. They (that is, the learners) extract and list the arguments for and the arguments against and discuss their own views'. This is a rare instance of the mention of a specific topic. Moreover, while the material, in taking a genre approach to text analysis, argues the need to read different text types in different ways, the notion of text itself is treated unproblematically as an object which is authoritative, generically consistent and intact and from which even quite advanced learners are invited to 'extract' meaning, rather than recreate or re-author it. So at level 2, a fairly advanced level, the Core Curriculum says:

Component skill and knowledge and understanding
Adults should learn to:

3a: identify the main points and specific detail as they occur in a range of different types of text of varying length and detail (p358)

Admittedly there is an acknowledgement of the need to read critically and in one brief section students are invited to compare news stories from tabloid and broadsheet newspapers commenting on the 'point of view' of each. However it is assumed that differences may be a matter of formality and readership and not ideological leaning. Not acknowledged is the indeterminacy of meaning, that textual authoring might be collaboratively achieved within speech communities or that making meaning is a matter of interpretation as much as of information processing.

The text in the library

There are other institutional spaces for texts beyond the classroom and curriculum and one obvious one is the College or University Library. In libraries there is frequently something called an ESOL section. What does this mean.? It is certainly useful to point to linguistically and culturally accessible texts for beginner ESOL learners, but these are not necessarily the texts found where library users might reasonably expect them.

I did a casual search of my own library, at the Institute of Education in London. Adult ESOL resources are lodged within the Adult Basic Skills section overall which is an area corralled from the main library arena. ESOL Assessment and ESOL Teaching nestle between Dyslexia and Learning Difficulties on the one hand and Fast Start Phonics on the other. A few shelves further on are large sets of what are signalled as 'Readers'. Readers don't read readers. Teachers might select them as simplified material, but learners often have much more precise reader identities and tastes. One of the students Ginny in Class B talks of having read all four of the Harry Potter books published at the time of our discussion. Moreover she takes great care of these at home. She says: ' If I see the movie I like to read the book as well. Like Harry Potter I don't let anybody touch my books' The fifth one (HP book) is coming out on 21 June'. Her world of texts is very different to the textual environment of the classroom and school and the library. So the label 'Readers' is an institutional convenience but may not be meaningful for an ESOL student visiting the library. The provision of a special corner within a much larger

collection of more serious looking books again signals the marginalisation of the learner of English as a second language.

Open and Closed Texts

The semiotician Umberto Eco, (1979) categorises texts as open or closed. Closed texts assume a single unequivocal response, identical to the author's intended meaning, while open texts presuppose an interplay of possible interpretations. Eco acknowledges that a straight opposition between open and closed narrative structures is an abstraction. Aiming to avoid fixed polarities, we might describe texts as showing varying *degrees* of openness and closedness. However at the far end of this continuum Eco describes a closed text as having the 'the stiffness of a crystal'. The texts in many ESOL classrooms may be said to demonstrate just this stiffness –indeed rigor mortis.

Admittedly, the EFL textbook looks lively: with CDs, a non-linear arrangement of text, a paraphernalia of accessories, it is multimodal text par excellence. In the provision of different learning modes it appears to offer different routes through the text, defying a linear reading (cf. Kress 2003). But such promise is largely illusory. In spite of some notable exceptions (eg. Littlejohn and Hicks (1996), who encourage students to author their own tasks) the prescribed activation of the text takes closedness as the default position, as is evident in the instructional rubric which rarely offers spaces for innovative use of the material. One of the difficulties too of the genre orientation, to which the ESOL Curriculum largely subscribes, is just this stiffness, or predictability. While it can be helpful for early readers to plan a pathway through the reading experience, the time comes for texts and tasks and the rubric which accompanies them in educational material, to defy predictability, that is to aim, as Eco puts it 'to give the Model Reader the solutions he does *not* expect, (my emphasis) challenging every overcoded intertextual frame as well as the reader's predictive indolence'. (Eco 1979:113)

In the rest of this paper I shall draw on a study of the way in which two teachers who I shall call Milly and Anthony, respectively teaching post beginner (Entry Level 2 in the National ESOL Curriculum) and intermediate level students (Entry Level 3), select and use texts. Both are considered by their students and line managers to be effective and successful teachers, both, in the vignettes we see, are teaching reading. However they are deploying texts in different ways; their

take on the question: 'what are classroom texts for' differs. Then in a following section I shall consider how the views of some students within these classes mesh with classroom practice in the choice and use of text. Broadly the conventional textual options for the ESOL teachers are: to work with the textbook, use worksheets or to bring into class authentic texts. In each case the basic textual material can be treated as an object or reshaped as a resource, that is, 'authored' in Goffman's terms.

The published textbook

Because of the perceived inappropriateness of the EFL textbook, noted above, ESOL teachers are discouraged from using them at least as a regular classroom resource. Texts have now been specially written to support the ESOL Core Curriculum, under the auspices of Skills for Life (2000), which is the national strategy in the United Kingdom for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills . These materials are attractively published in loose leaf form, with high colour. While there is a strong element of social realism and the aspirational content of the EFL textbook is largely missing, there are also images of fairly successful young people, driving a car, with non manual jobs, and occasionally taking the initiative in interactions. There is some attempt to avoid the stereotype of the hapless, dependent and poorly educated students which features in earlier ESOL material (cf. Clarke and Clarke 1990). Nonetheless the 'infantilisation' of ESOL learners remains, with a tendency for learners to be represented in client or subordinate positions. ESOL teachers, concerned and indeed bored with such images, may find themselves seduced back to the ubiquitous global EFL textbook. The published commercial textbook offers reassurance which eludes the Skills for Life material. The very names of titles such as 'Headway' and 'Cutting Edge' or 'Innovations' offer a promise and excitement which 'Skills for Life' can hardly match.

As important as the material itself, is the use to which it is put. While students in classrooms designated as EFL are likely to have full access to a textbook, highly ambivalent attitudes to this artefact are played out in the ESOL classroom. Milly, Class A teacher, does not allow students access to Headway as she wishes to reserve the right to police its use both in the classroom and at home. She acts as its gatekeeper, noting of the students: 'they may want to read ahead'.

Certainly it is not made available for private study at home, as many students desire.

Kress et al (2005) conclude in their study of the English classroom in urban schools that texts are increasingly fragmented in their use, as access to them becomes heavily policed through activities which disallow access to the entirety of a text, a sense of its wider contextualisation and purpose. There is evidence of this process in the ESOL classroom. Teachers take control of which parts of textbooks are to be made available to learners. And while they may see the flexible use of a textbook as linked to their right to exercise professional judgement, students express some frustration, as is evident in this extract:

M: I want you to turn to page 10. Are all the books out?

St: We didn't finish the 9 one

At the same time students struggle to author the text with input from their own knowledge resources. The text under discussion is about 'communication' and one student volunteers: 'Animals can communicate as well'. The student has in fact anticipated a later section of the text, but the teacher is not ready for this yet, so her response is: 'Can they? What about humans?' Student bids to redirect classroom discourse are sacrificed to the need for orderliness and classroom control.

The text as worksheet

With the EFL textbook, at least in its entirety, vetoed as the basis for textual work in the ESOL classroom, the teacher resorts to the production of worksheets. The worksheet culture has historically been part of a calculated homeliness in the ESOL classroom, leading one of the teachers in the EEP project to talk of 'knitting worksheets'. Better access to photocopying and computers has led to higher quality products so that even when authentic, that is naturally occurring, texts are available, teachers may opt to use a worksheet facsimile. This is evident in school classrooms too in the U.K. where teachers will use commercially produced mock-ups of text genres such as 'news report' rather than readily available examples of the real thing. As with the textbooks, the commercial production of these may seem to offer greater face validity to teachers and pupils. Texts drawn from recognisably authentic sources may be seen as not pedagogically serious enough.

Perhaps too the worksheet format, especially in adult literacy and ESOL classrooms, offers distance from the personal experience from which it may derive. In its pedagogised reworking and rewording it has been 'made safe'; it becomes a less risky option than a text with immediate relevance and resonance. This was the case with a text which Milly was using with her Entry Level 2 learners who were in a class for 16 – 18 year olds. This text was headed : *How I left my country.* Milly had drawn this from a collection of student produced material, recounting their true life stories – although it had not been created by the class she was teaching, and she did not introduce it to the class as having been written by a student who was recounting his experience of escaping from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Here is a vignette of the classroom use of this text;

'Most of the work is done in full class, with learners responding to the teacher. There is a considerable amount of reading aloud; a total of 7 times, as well as in pairs to each other. This appears to be used as a form of control, in a class which the teacher regards as naughty. The teacher goes through a series of steps to tackle the text: pre reading prediction, comprehension questions, comprehension of text with the paper turned over and a cloze of the original text. Then there is work on new words with dictionaries and some form focused work, with students underlining the past tense'

In the above vignette we see the text as something to be worked on, as a site of mechanically performed operations (cf. Kress et al 2005). We might say the text is thoroughly exploited, if not exhausted. Milly asks students to underline, read aloud again and again. Much of this work is motivated by test requirements so that filling gapped texts is seen as something which the test requires, as it seems when Milly says: ' we did a gap fill on the data projector on the past tense. And the reason we chose the gap fill is that they struggle with that. One of the exam questions in the Pitman exam is an English usage question whereby they have a piece of text and they have to fill in the gap of fifteen words and they find that very difficult.' We see then that the story, a powerful narrative of danger and escape, is 'made safe' for language work. Indeed the cloze or gap fill exercise is seen not as a tool to develop reading at all but to practise grammar. This is suggested by Milly's response to the interviewer:

I: So you don't see it (the gap fill exercise) as helping them with their reading particularly?

M: No. no. It is helpful with the grammar because they've got to choose the right tense and the right verb to go in the sentence. And obviously they need to know the subject and object of the sentence as well in order to put the correct word in, whether it is a conjunction or a preposition.

I: So you would see it more … less as a reading support activity

M: more sort of grammar.

In conclusion then, even where a narrative has been produced as part of a language experience approach and might resonate with the experiences of other students, its classroom treatment closes down wider interpretative possibilities. The worksheet can only be completed as a perfect text (full marks are possible in this format) under the teacher's purview. There is a single outcome. Of course worksheet material *can* be used as open texts in which cloze tasks might be used to negotiate a range of possible options. However here the assigned task (to choose single correct answers to fill the gaps) treats the text as closed to a range of interpretative options.

The authentic text

It is clear that even if a teacher takes what we would normally see as an authentic text into the class, - such as a newspaper, a short story, or an advertisement, it immediately loses its authenticity of original purpose once it is recontextualised in the classroom. Nonetheless for students it has high face validity. When Anthony brings in the day's Metro (the free London newspaper) the students are impressed, largely because of its timeliness – its immediacy. These are students who are very interested in and knowledgeable about current affairs. In the classes I observed, Anthony frequently used authentically occurring texts. These showed a range of both genres and topics, including a regular feature entitled 'a day in the life of', a poem, various newspaper texts on food or shopping, and an internet text which I feature below about anti social behaviour. These original texts become pedagogic artefacts as teacher designed tasks mediate in their reading.

On one occasion Anthony brings in an authentic, highly topical text. It concerns new proposals to deal with anti social behaviour by the then Home

Secretary David Blunkett. The text has been taken directly from the BBC Website. However Anthony, as a teacher who is always carefully prepared, has devised a set of tasks against which he wants the text to be read. As we see later the students do not always play ball. Below is one segment of the class which follows the initial 'pre-reading' stage where students have been discussing their ideas of anti social behaviour in groups.

Transcription conventions:

( )	not clear
(.)	seconds of silence
=	overlaps
Caps	loudness
… at turn end	rapid exchange of turns

T: teacher   S: Student/s

1. T: Shall we report back to see if we've got any new ideas from different groups? Perhaps Mina and Jali, could you very briefly tell the class what's on your list?
2. S: one thing is the gypsy people you can see, gypsy, is it correct, gypsy people?
3. T: gypsy people,
4. S: is that how we call them, gypsy people?
5. S: =we call them gypsy=
6. T: =yes, we have..g.. gypsy people yes
7. S: and we can see them, especially in Oxford Street I saw them and they come to you and-
8. S2: They are not gypsy, you can't tell that they are gypsy, gypsy people are ( ) you have special people who are gypsy and they are not BEGGAR
9. S: you think about beggars?
10. S: no, no they come to you and push you, give me money, give me money
11. S: =no no=
12. Ss: = no no ( )
13. T: =people begging yes yes=
14. Ss: =( ) no they are… they are not begging=
15. T: we can't say they're gypsies, we can say people begging, all sorts of people beg
16. S: beggars
17. S: now it's a crime?
18. S: ( )they wear long dress, it's only woman, bring their children
19. S: =on the TV, on the TV the police call them gypsy people that's why, it's because…..it's..
20. T: OK gypsy, shall we
21. S: it's not anti-social behaviour in our community … ( )we haven't got any gypsies ((laughing))
22. S: it's not anti social
23. T: have you never seen any beggars around Acton?
24. S: no, no not Acton
25. T: never? Nobody's ever asked you for money on the street?

26. S: yes, but there are cameras… cameras
27. T: =yes=
28. S: =now it's a crime….£40=
29. S: =no not sitting down, Safeway=
30. T: = outside Safeway=
31. Ss =( ) now it's a crime…yes yes=
32. Ss ( ) now it's a crime, it's not anti social behaviour
33. T: shall we put begging up? That's a good one OK
34. S: you know Anthony, there is new law now that begging is going to be crime
35. Ss: (   ) ((students talking at once))
36. T: OK.
37. S: I heard
38. T: we're going to read about that, fantastic Suzanna, good.
39. Su: ((to other student)) it's going to be a crime
40 T: so we've got begging, and I'm not saying that is anti-social but we'll make a list of our ideas, and what else did you think of?

It is striking here that several of the students are able to assert their authority as having expert knowledge about matters under discussion. This is what triggers the extended discussion about the distinction between beggars and gypsies. This is not amenable to any notion of right or wrong answers to be derived from an authoritative classroom text, heavily policed by the teacher. However the boundary between teacher and student knowledge remains: an instance of this is where the student Suzanna informs Anthony about the new law on begging in turn 34, acknowledged by Anthony in classic teacherly manner by 'we're going to read about that, fantastic Suzanna'. Although Anthony validates Suzanna's predictive skill, unlike Milly's rather summary dismissal of her student's bid about animal communication noted earlier, his approval is directed at her convergence with the lesson framing (you have successfully anticipated the content of the text, in the manner expected of the pre-reading phase) rather than the astuteness of the remark, substantively speaking.

For many years reading pedagogy has prescribed classroom ways of reading text, in terms of pre, while and post reading tasks in very much the manner which Anthony, similarly to Milly, subscribes to here. (cf Barr et al, 1981, Wallace 1992). The assumption has been that novice readers need to mirror the strategies of the 'good reader'. One such strategy supposedly is that the good reader anticipates the text, and this is the purpose of Anthony's extended pre-reading phase here. Milly whose framing is typically much stronger than Anthony's, on

one occasion says firmly to a student anxious to get at the text: No, I don't want you to read yet. Thank you very much'

One difficulty with the orthodox task regime of pre/while/post reading is that it tends to assume a restricted range of interpretative possibilities – pre-reading explicitly invites predictions and may therefore promote 'predictive indolence', as Eco puts it, assuming a default position of the highly predictable, closed text. Further the text remains firmly in the teacher's control as its meaning is only gradually yielded up to the students. As Baker (1988) notes, it is evident here that learners are "asked to treat the text as unfamiliar terrain to students and known to teachers" The only person who can read the text beforehand is the teacher, who thereby becomes the "expert" who sets the questions, knows the answers and provides the framework – through a set of tasks for instance - for how the text is to be read.

Following this extended pre-reading discussion Anthony discloses the task and the text for the class to work with. The task is:

Read the BBC online news article "Blunkett targets yob culture" and answer the following questions:
  1. *What is David Blunkett's position in the government? What is he responsible for?*
  2. *What kinds of anti-social behaviour are mentioned in the report?*
  3. *Why does Mr Blunkett believe it is necessary for the government to tackle anti social behaviour?*
  4. *Who disagrees with Mr Blunkett? Why?*

In the extract below Lin, Susanna, Xian, and Simon talk about the text. The teacher wants students to answer questions about the views expressed in the text (in relation to Blunkett's proposals). He circulates around each group in the class and sits with them to supervise the task.

What we see in the discussion is the way in which the students lay claim to a way of using this text which Anthony has not authorised through his task design, against which he expects the text to be read.

Notes on transcription:

Transcription conventions:

( )	not clear
(.)	seconds of silence
=	overlaps
Caps	loudness
… at turn end	rapid exchange of turns

1. Su: yes, where is it, about begging. It says (20 seconds) ah yes, nobody needs to beg in this country

Lin: mm

2. Su: I think the same, when I er
3. Lin: yes
4. Su: saw them at first in Oxford street or somewhere, (.) I couldn't believe it in this country,   because this government =

Lin=helps you=

5. Su   help everybody
6. Lin   mmm

Su they are there begging especially young people, boys they are sitting

7. Si: ( ) normally ( )
8. Su   we have one and (   )
9. Si   they are just greedy I think
10. X   no no no some of them they came here they apply asylum but th- the they NOT lazy, they not ( ) they not (   ), and it's not like before you get home they give you home if you're homeless,

Si =so they are homeless

11. (0.5)
12. X   they are homeless, they are real homeless. You can't- you can't find room and do you know how much they gave them per week?
13. Si   mm
14. X   thirty six or thirty seven pound, ( ) fault, th-
15. Su   for homeless?
16. X   no all the people apply asylum and it's difficult find a job even if it's
17. Su   sometimes you see English = people   are=
18. T   = ARE WE ALL INVOLVED?=
19. Lin   mm
20. Su   sitting in the street and = begging=
21. T   = HAVE YOU GONE THROUGH ALL OF THOSE   QUESTIONS?
22. Lin   now = we discuss it first
23. X: = I don't think it's because they are (1) not enough, because they are drunk

Si   yes, about English people asking for money, you know bus stop

24. X   (   )
25. Si   how about I get thirty pounds I just want to go home
26. Su   (   )
27. T   sorry?
28. Su   nobody needs to beg in this country
29. T   right

Su   it was the same (   ) when I first saw the beggars in this   country

30. T   mhm you think it's not necessary, =OK, HAVE WE REACHED
    QUESTION   THREE YET?
31. Su: Young and healthy
32. T   HAVE WE REACHED QUESTION THREE YET, XIAN? HAVE
    YOU ALREADY TALKED ABOUT NUMER TWO?
33. X   mmm/
34. Lin   sometimes they need more money
35. X   I don't I don't know, I just ( )
36. T   alright.
37. X   who I see all of the day
38. Su   I think he just lazy, being doing work

We see how the students persist in rearticulating both the text and the
prescribed task so as to pursue discussion about issues which concern them, and
about which they are knowledgeable. They position themselves as expert
interpreters. The text forms a backdrop for discursive talk, common in this
classroom but relatively rare in many others. It raises the questions we started
with: what is classroom reading for, and what is the text for? While we may need
to be careful not to validate what Eco (ibid) has called 'an indiscriminate use of
texts', - a wanton disregard for any stable features of form, meaning or pragmatic
value, here the students are arguably using this text in the way it asks to be read,
not pedagogically but as a trigger for discussion on a topical matter of public
concern. They are re-authoring the text . What we see is the creation of a coherent
new text authored against the original one.

Because the learners in Anthony's class are able to bring funds of knowledge
to the text, they take firm ownership of it, bypassing the prescribed task. Such re-
authoring is less feasible in the case of the bowdlerised textbook or the ready
prepared worksheet which are commonly drained of topicality and personal
relevance. In such cases the text is 'made safe' for the language classroom. This
position is described in Kress et al (2005) as taking the 'retreat from the street'
view', and is echoed in a study by Hodge and Pitt (2003). As Hodge and Pitt note,
the view of one teacher in an ESOL classroom consisting mainly of those seeking
asylum and refugee status was: 'So if they've got problems we try and deal with
them at other times… the classroom time is lesson time, and that is the time when
they can be just a student and switch off'. A similar position was reflected in one
school in the study by Kress et al of London secondary schools, where teachers'

'genuine desire to reach out to the variety of cultural experiences of the students' led to them opting for universalism rather than personalising of experience.   Yet in interviews with the researchers the students made their own strong experiential links, commenting about the text studied: Romeo and Juliet : 'In Muslim religions if you are going out with a girl or boy, its not allowed basically' (Kress et al 2005: 146).

Student Uptake of texts

What different kinds of student uptake of text are apparent in the ways in which teachers deploy classroom text.? In the worksheet culture students are invited to act *on* text, rather than recreate it or reshape it to their own ends. We see them reproducing the text multiple times. Input into the text is discouraged, even though in Milly's class the worksheet *How I left my country* originated as a student produced text. One of the students in the class, Feryad recounts an almost identical experience in an out of class interview. And the students had seen a film on television the night before on this very topic. I had also, as the classroom observer on this occasion, seen the film and was looking forward to some discussion of this. However the teacher did not pursue it. Possibilities of student input into the text, as uniquely expert contributors in its re-authoring, were closed down.

Anthony's class offers greater uptake on many levels. He allows space for students to recreate the text – the text becomes a trigger for the creation of new texts. We also see how in his class the text mediates talk in cognitively advanced ways which also stretch language learning, as captured in my field notes in this vignette where students share resources to make meaning

> *The theme of the day is: sites of archeological interest and Anthony begins by relating this to the students' own countries of origin, saying 'Tell your group about any sites of archeological interest in your country'. On the table I focus on sit Lin, Xuemin and Ginny. Each student talks about his/her own cultural context and also asks questions about the other's. A student may introduce a topic, for instance the presence of jade as a mineral resource in China, but then direct a question to another student , as when Xuemin says to Lin: do you have (it) in your country.? The students draw on a number of resources as they search to express concepts unfamiliar to their peers, including visual representations, (at one point Lin draws a diagram to support his account of how cocoa is produced, giving an excellent account of the process – how the fruit produces seeds which are extracted to produce cocoa powder), pointing to the blackboard for key words, and, especially in Xuemin's case, consulting an electronic dictionary. In particular they negotiate around the search for the right word, continually suggesting, modifying or rejecting bids from their partners.*

The example here shows how students may draw on what are sometimes called multimodal resources. Text creation is not just verbal or expressed through linear print, and second language learners may make effective use of a range of expressive resources. A multimodal approach is one 'where attention is given to all the culturally shaped resources that are available for meaning making' (Kress et al 2005) . Teachers and students create a classroom text not just in the conventional manner of the production of print or written outcomes but ongoingly through the way gestural resources and body movement is used (Bourne and Jewitt 2003). This is largely unconscious, and yet it seems appropriate in the language classroom to make more specific and deliberate use of a wider range of semiotic resources. Images and drawing are , of course, frequently used to support language presentation. However what tends to be neglected are student resources which are not dependent on conventional language production. One of the most effective lessons which Milly presented involved asking the students to mime simple ideas, lexical items or expressions. What was striking was the skill which

these young people were able to convey meaning gesturally while they were struggling to encode language items in conventional texts.

What students say about texts:

There is an ambivalence about the textbook in students' own narratives. In general it is preferred to the worksheet. As one student based in Hull in the EEP study says: 'a book is known, its for a particular course and more convenient, whereas I can take papers but go home and I may lose them'. Students are aware too of the cultural capital the global textbook carries, and that it is favoured in the higher prestige 'EFL' designated groups in their colleges. And yet they are aware too of its deadness; indeed it is Ginny's account below in conversation with me and Lin which suggested the title for this paper. (It needs to be acknowledged however that I start with a highly leading question in the first turn!):

1. *C: So, if you had a choice, I mean, would you rather use a text like the text that the Anthony brought in from the Metro today? Or would you rather use a text from a book? I mean which do you think is more interesting? Because this came from the paper today, didn't it? These texts of course, (those in the textbook) some of them are older. They are collected in a book. Which do you prefer to read and to study? Which is of more interest for you?*
2. *Ginny: I like this one. ((referring to the text brought in from the Metro, headed 'Why We Love our Desert Island Discs'))*
3. *Lin: I like this one.*
4. *C: Do you want to say more? More about, why this is more interesting, do you?*
5. *Lin: in the book (ie. the class textbook) sometimes if you read the story, it's not like, it's not… what can I say? It's not attractive ( ) When we found something very interesting, we brought the class. And when you rod ((read)) this one it's more than the book.*
6. *Ginny : Yeah, like dead mouse,*
7. *C: uh?*
8. *Ginny: that book is like dead mouse.*
9. *Lin: yeah.*
10. *C: like a dead mouse?*
11. *Ginny: hhh: it's so-, you know.*
12. *C: The book is like a dead mouse.?*
13. *Ginny : like solid things. You don't, you know, they don't <u>get</u> you. But paper is real,*
14. *C: Yeah, because it has eh. Well it is quite interesting, isn't it?   Because it's obviously about life in London.   It's,- we are all interested in everyday life, aren't we?*

What is striking here is Ginny's characterisation of the textbook as inert, lifeless, solid, dead – a 'dead mouse' - recalling the metaphor of stiffness which Eco invokes in his notion of the closed text.

Conclusion

I started with a literacy story: a woman reading on a train. What literacy stories do the learners presented here have to tell? What texts mediate in their lives? Frequently it seems as though a rich textual hinterland, glimpsed in some of the students' comments on personal literacy and real life experiences, is bypassed in favour of a utilitarian and pedestrian diet of worksheets. Admittedly language learning needs may claim priority in the ESOL classroom. However, this need not mean treating texts as mere containers of grammatical knowledge to be pillaged piece meal. Nor does it indicate a model of reading which involves filleting texts for cultural knowledge or 'facts'. There are moments in Anthony's class which point the way to textual authoring, where what is brought to the text is as important as specific kinds of grammatical or content knowledge derived from it, especially through negotiated and multimodal meaning making of the kind which Lin and his peers engage in. The richest talk for both learning and socialisation was triggered in these moment of shared knowledge building around text.

A view of text as a social artefact, allows us to envisage reader progress as a growing engagement with an ever wider range of texts, of increasing linguistic, sociocultural and semantic complexity, an engagement which is socially mediated within and outside classrooms. Offered access to a range of creative work with texts, readers develop an expanded textual repertoire. At the same time as breadth is developed so is depth of linguistic knowledge, because micro features of texts become explainable and comprehensible within both their immediate textual and wider sociocultural environment.

In general, students in adult ESOL classes, often to a greater degree than so called 'home' students, are well informed about contemporary social life, both locally within the UK and globally. What the learners in the classes we observed shared were a high degree of knowledge of and interest in current affairs. Texts about life in Britain, such as the Blunkett one, need not have assimilationist purposes – teaching one 'how to be a better citizen' for instance- but can serve to

encourage the discussion of texts as necessarily arising from within a cultural milieu, and to show how particular discourses, images and information reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies and social practices. Contemporary everyday texts are permeated by diverse cultural histories and complex intertextuality, and might be more widely used in ESOL classes than at present, especially in classrooms whose students collectively represent great diversity of linguistic, cultural and life experience resources. Adult ESOL learners are well placed to bring creative and critical resources to bear on a wide range of contemporary texts. Such artefacts offer a way of avoiding the unyielding stiffness, the solidity of the textbook and the monologic demands of the worksheet, which continue to constitute the main textual diet in the ESOL classroom.

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