

# A Communicative Approach to Reading Comprehension Exercise Design—A Case Study of *I Have a Dream*

TANG Li

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Reading competence is one of the basic skills of language acquisition. The teaching of reading skill has been attached great importance to in College English education in China. For decades, people have made efforts to improve the classroom teaching effects through various means, one of which is that of communicative approach. This paper attempts to explore the design of reading comprehension exercise through a case study in the light of communicative theory, thus providing an alternative to the conventional reading course teaching method.

*Keywords:* reading comprehension, exercise design, a communicative approach

## Introduction

Reading competence is one of the basics of language acquisition. In the realm of college English education in China, there are yearly national tests for all the college students—both English and non-English majors—Test for English Majors Band 4 and Test for English Majors Band 8 (TEM-4 and TEM-8) for the former, and College English Test Band 4 and College English Test Band 6 (CET-4 and CET-6) for the latter.

In the above tests, as for the part of reading comprehension, multiple choices have accounted for the major part for years, though with very slight modification of adding more testing items such as answering questions to the previous version.

As for the reading course, conventionally most of the reading comprehension exercises focus on the form of multiple choices and True or False statements, which is more suitable for qualifying the marks on the part of the teacher than the evaluation of the comprehensive reading competence of the students. It is hard to ignore the side effects of such exercise design in which reading comprehension tends to be a passive process with the students guessing the answer from the provided choices.

Therefore, it is suggested to introduce new forms of exercises to motivate the students to read the passage in an active mode, thus evaluating their reading competence more comprehensively.

## China's National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate English Majors Concerning Reading

The latest version of National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate English Majors, an instructive document by Ministry of Education in China, specifies the quality teaching of English programs across the country. In this document, the aim of the talent cultivation of English majors is to develop the ability to study, research, and communicate, and meanwhile the capability of innovation, practice, and critical thinking

(Zhong, 2015). In the guideline of the allocation of courses, reading (both topic-oriented and analysis-oriented types) is specifically presented (Jiang, 2014).

It is easy to tell, reading, as one of the basic language skills, holds an increasingly important position in language education in China, which expands itself from comprehending level to analytical and further critical level. As a result, the design of reading comprehension exercise faces new challenge and demands innovation. The accuracy-oriented exercises like multiple choices, or True or False no longer satisfy the needs of the development of the teaching and there must be a change.

### **Communicative Approach**

Allen and Widdowson (2000) propose “there is a need for new approach to language teaching which will shift the focus of attention from grammatical to the communicative properties of language” (p. 122). According to their understanding, language should be presented with its feature as communication. It is suggested that teachers should “foreground” characters of language that possess specific communicative value.

Conventionally, reading comprehension exercise lays more emphasis on the semantic value of vocabulary, certain sentences or some specific paragraphs, while ignoring the fact that the reading passage as a whole possesses its innate property of communication or function. As a result, the design of the reading exercise must take into consideration how to help the students respond to the text in terms of its communicative or functional property through various means.

### **Reading Comprehension Exercise Design**

Understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible... When devising exercises, we should vary the questions and the activities according to the type of the text studied and the purpose in reading it. (Grellet, 2000, pp. 3-4)

Munby (as cited in Grellet, 2000) lists a number of reading skills in his *Communicative Syllabus Design*, three among which will be selected as the guidelines for the reading comprehension exercise design on Martin Luther King’s speech *I Have a Dream* as a case study in this paper. The purpose of it is to illustrate to what extent the communicative approach can be applied in a certain type of text, hereby the type of public speech.

#### **Skill One: Extracting Salient Points to Summarize**

It is clear that one should start with global understanding and move towards detailed understanding rather than working the other way around... Similarly when constructing reading comprehension exercises on a given text, it is always preferable to start with overall meaning of the text, its function and aim, rather than working on vocabulary or more specific ideas. (Grellet, 2000, p. 6)

Conventionally, the exercise concerning “main idea”, “thesis”, “theme” is presented most often in the form of multiple choices, which is less effective in promoting the students to respond actively to the text than the exercise of summary.

A summary is a brief restatement of the essential thought of a longer piece of text by representing the theme of the original with much fewer words. Summary writing can help students to read with concentration of attention and meanwhile assess their writing competence.

Exercise One: Summary Writing

Write a summary for Martin Luther King’s speech *I Have a Dream* in about 300 words.

It is worth mentioning that the word limit of the summary varies with the level of the students or the time allocation of the overall exercise.

### **Skill Two: Understanding the Communicative Value (Function) of Sentences and Utterances**

This skill stresses the “function” of a certain text. As for the functions of texts, Peter Newmark (2001) generalizes them as “expressive”, “informative”, and “evocative”. It is worth noting that none the above functions is unique to a certain type of text. In fact, it is often the case that almost all the texts entail the three with more emphasis on one function than the other. In this regard, it is not a sensible way to let the students merely judge which one of the functions a certain passage performs; instead, a more comprehensive exercise will do a much better job as follows.

#### Exercise Two: Functions of Text

A. Decide which function/functions each paragraph performs by ticking the corresponding space in the form.

	Functions		
Paragraph 1	Expressive function	Informative function	Evocative function
Paragraph 2			
...			
The last paragraph			

B. Locate two paragraphs in which two or three functions are presented. Illustrate how the functions are achieved in various linguistic levels such vocabulary, sentence structure or rhetorical devices.

This exercise is designed in a way that helps students to comprehend the passage by sorting the relevant information out as the first step and extract the information to accomplish a more motivating task as the second. Especially in the second, the students are instructed to elaborate how a certain function of the text is achieved by the illustration of a linguistic form such as rhetorical devices. It is a more open question which urges the students to employ stylistic knowledge to analyze the speech in the light of the communicative or functional properties embodied in it. It is much more efficient and effective than the sole explanation of a certain word or figure of speech.

### **Skill Three: Interpreting Text by Going Outside It**

It is a misconception to separate reading comprehension from other language competence just for the convenience of grading the students’ performance from the part of the teacher. As has been mentioned in Exercise One, summary writing is to integrate reading with writing. It is worth noting that summary writing focuses on the reading the text itself, while the following exercises, also in the form of writing, go beyond the text and motivate the students to respond more actively and critically to the text.

#### Exercise Three: Personal Recollection Writing

Suppose you were one of the listeners present at Lincoln Memorial where the speech was delivered on Aug. 28, 1963. Years later, you would like to record what had happened on that day as part of your memoir.

#### Exercise Four: Letter Writing

Suppose you are an African-American living in the present US. You would like to write a letter to Martin Luther King in which you relate what he has advocated in his speech to the current situation in US. You may show to what extent has his dream come true or has failed. You may also reveal your feedback or reflection on the “dream” through some of the crucial moments of civil rights movement.

The above two exercises let the students assume of the role of a “real” listener with social identity and assign him/her the task to get involved in the reading passage, or more specifically, in the social event. Language is no more the tool for comprehension but a means of communication. The two exercises are coherent with each other in that the listener/reader is supposed to transcend time and reflect on the social event against the specific background either in the past or at present. In this way, students are taught how to approach a text as independent and efficient readers. More thorough and thought-provoking feedback will be produced by the student through researching, reflection as well as reading.

### **Conclusion**

Reading comprehension is not merely a skill to grasp the text’s information. According to communicative theory, the exercise design needs to present the communicative or functional value of the language, thus helping students to make use of the text to accomplish its pragmatical or social aim.

Furthermore, it is not sensible to isolate reading skill from other language skills. As a result, reading comprehension exercise design is advised to go beyond its own confinement and integrate itself with other skill such as writing or listening where possible. Future research may focus on how the integration of reading and listening can be conducted to explore the communicative or functional value of the text.

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