INTRODUCTION

Throughout my first year of teaching in Hong Kong the most frustrating and disappointing aspect of the syllabus was always the study of the reader. In my previous experience the use of extensive fiction had always been the most exciting part of the scheme of work—the students usually enjoyed the reading, and it seemed to bring life and meaning to much of what they had studied in the course-books. Even so, I always felt that much more could be gained from the study of a reader than actually was. The problem was defining what exactly was wrong with the readers.

The students in Hong Kong genuinely seemed to dread the reader lessons and saw them as simply another way of acquiring new vocabulary items. The idea of gaining any kind of enjoyment from them never seemed to cross their minds. In effect, far from stimulating the students' interest in English, extensive reading actually further reinforced their negative feelings for the study of the language.

In an attempt to change this attitude towards reading fiction I began to analyse why it existed. The problem could be found in three areas—the content of the readers (plot, subject matter, setting, characters etc.), the level of difficulty of the language, and the follow-up activities used with the readers. The readers largely tended to be simplified, often simplified classics, or lacking in any relevant subject matter with which the students could identify. The language levels were problematic in that the students at a particular level often found the readers recommended for that level far too simple. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the readers did not readily lend themselves to stimulating follow-up exercises. Those used tended to concentrate almost entirely on reading skills. So I began to think of ways of building into the readers activities which the teachers could access without having to spend time preparing materials and without having to find specialist help, for example from an artist.

EXTENSIVE READING

Extensive reading is probably the activity which is given the least genuine atten-
tion in most language courses—certainly in the schools in Hong Kong. It is usually accepted by course designers that the skills practised, or acquired, while reading extensively are valuable and that the activity itself can somehow be important in the development of the students' knowledge of, and ability in, the target language. However, it is rarely asked exactly how extensive reading helps, and in what ways the activity is important to language development. Therefore, the material used is often unsuitable for the students or for the aims of the course and the activities presented to help with the reading can, in effect, be detrimental to the students' language development. This can best be demonstrated in the "circles" of the weak and the good reader (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: The "vicious circle" of the weak reader, from Nuttall (1982:167, fig. 25); reproduced by courtesy of Heinemann Publishers (Oxford) Ltd

Figure 2: The "virtuous circle" of the good reader, from Nuttall (1982:168, fig. 26); reproduced by courtesy of Heinemann Publishers (Oxford) Ltd
If the material is too difficult or not of any interest to the students then they will not benefit at all from the activity—in fact, harm may well be done as it increases their reluctance to read outside the classroom. What is often not considered by teachers, and has a direct effect on the “circle”, is the type of activities that are done with the readers. To break the vicious circle it is essential that the students begin to gain some enjoyment from the study of a reader. As long as reading in English is associated only with academic study (in English-medium schools), it can never really be perceived as a source of enjoyment. The commonest type of activity used with the readers, factual recall/comprehension questions, simply duplicate the activities used with textbooks in geography, history, science and other subjects—therefore the vicious circle is perpetuated. On the other hand, interesting activities can often compensate for an uninspiring reader and encourage the students to read further so that they can accomplish the activities—thereby entering the virtuous circle.

It should go without saying that the major reason for extensive reading is to provide the opportunity for the student to read for pleasure in the target language and to develop those specific skills which will enable pleasure to be derived from the reading. However, there are other valid psychological and linguistic reasons for using readers in the classrooms. Readers create the possibility of internalising the language and reinforcing points previously learned. Obviously second-language students cannot expect to meet the majority of their vocabulary in context in their daily lives so they need to be provided with what Krashen (1985:218) calls “comprehensible input”. It is hoped that the structures, vocabulary and concepts that the students have already encountered will subconsciously register and be reinforced. Secondly, readers provide a genuine language context and a focal point for the students in their own efforts to communicate. We have a great deal of difficulty in remembering a series of unconnected, unrelated words or structures even in our first language. Learners have even more difficulty. They need a meaningful context to relate to—and an interesting reader can provide this. The reader can also provide meaningful stimulus in the activities that follow. To speak or write successfully the student must have something he or she wishes to communicate. Finally, readers can motivate the student to read further. A story with an interesting or exciting plot can engage the reader and encourage him/her to read on to find out what happened, even though the language may be difficult.

**THE HONG KONG EXPERIENCE**

The importance of the reader in a scheme of work is reflected, to some extent, in the *Syllabus for English* published by the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) in Hong Kong. Although this document does not give very much guidance as to
how a reader could be used (apart from a few simple and general suggestions, for example, “picture drawing, character description, extracts for oral-aural work etc.”) it does state that:

Supplementary reading can play an extremely important role in English learning ... Graded readers can do much to help language learning if the teacher bears the following objectives in mind while using them:

(i) Developing good reading habits in the students;
(ii) Developing students’ imaginations;
(iii) Extending students’ writing skills;
(iv) Utilizing the content of the book as an aid to developing language skills other than reading;
(v) Testing comprehension in a non-verbal manner.

... There are, of course, other ways of using readers usefully and so generous allocation of time should be given to supplementary reading.

At present these recommendations do not seem to be being carried out in many schools. The reader is often used only once, for 35 out of a total of 350 minutes’ English per week, and very few of the objectives listed above seem to have been considered by the teachers.

If we accept, then, that readers are an important part of a language course, it is necessary to examine in some detail their current role in the schemes of work in the schools and to try to ascertain why the use of the reader is so unpopular with the students. In a small-scale survey, I asked my own students general questions about the readers they had enjoyed (very few and, in some cases, none) and any activities they liked to do. I also asked my colleagues if their reader lessons were any more successful than my own. These discussions were only of limited use as the students could not envisage the range of activities that could be used with a reader (having been exposed solely to written comprehension questions in some cases) and the teachers felt that they had to say the students enjoyed their lessons (or, in some cases, that the question was irrelevant) to avoid their own teaching ability being brought into question. The main insight into what could be done with the readers to make them more successful came from the types of activities which were used in the English Club and in other lessons which were not restricted to the scheme of work or coursebooks. The students genuinely seemed to enjoy the type of activity which involved problem solving of some kind (puzzles, cross-words, word-searches etc.) and they also seemed to be highly stimulated by pictures, especially cartoons.
In an attempt to gain a clearer image of the faults of the readers, the deficiencies of the activities that were usually used, and the preferences of both the students and the teachers, I designed a brief questionnaire to give to both groups; the questions were modified slightly to suit the intended respondents. All respondents were promised anonymity. The questions dealt with the attitudes and preferences of the students and teachers towards the use of readers; the methodology used; and possible improvements/changes to the actual published texts of the readers which would make them more useful to the teacher and attractive to the student.

Firstly, and in some ways most importantly, both students and teachers recognised the need for readers in the syllabus. Unfortunately, the majority of the students said they did not enjoy reading in English even though they enjoyed reading in Chinese. Although the majority of the teachers agreed that one of the most important functions of the reader is to promote the activity of reading in English for pleasure, not a single student apparently realised that they were supposed to be enjoying the books they read. The students see the readers as simply another way of learning vocabulary and, somehow, of improving reading skills.

**A NEW READER**

I therefore decided to embark upon the production of a reader which would consciously meet the needs of the teachers and my students at Form 3 level (age 15). Obviously, the most important thing to do before producing the reader, then, was to discover why the students gain so little satisfaction from the readers they read. They are neither accustomed nor encouraged to think about the merits of textbooks supplied by the teachers. Both the students and the teachers in my survey agreed that readers based in Hong Kong are more appealing to the students. The students also agreed that adventure and mystery stories are the most popular. However, Hong Kong-based stories do not seem to have been used at all and adventure/mystery stories only infrequently (in the eyes of the students at least—there seems to be a significant difference of opinion between the teachers and the students as to what actually constitutes a mystery or an adventure story). Therefore, the first requirement for the planned reader would be that it should be an *adventure* or *mystery* story (and recognised as such by the students!) *set in Hong Kong*.

If the teacher reads to the students, this can provide animation to the book or be the death of a good story—depending on the dramatic ability of the teacher. There is also the problem of speed of reading. Everybody in the class will read at a different speed; thus if the teacher or another student is reading, the speed will often be too fast or too slow. Finally, a choral approach is certainly a painful method of killing the pleasure of reading. The one option which seems to be the
most obvious, yet which not a single teacher I surveyed had used, is simply to let
the students read silently at their own pace. In practice, a combination of listening
to a professionally recorded tape (when available), silent reading and the teacher
reading highlights, seems to be most effective. Therefore, the planned reader
should have an accompanying tape of the text and should include activities which
force the teacher to arrange silent reading lessons.

It seems that a great deal of the blame for the lack of enjoyment gained by the
students from the readers must be placed on the comprehension activities. The
teachers know what the recommended activities are (for example in the CDC’s
Syllabus for English Forms 1-5), but the readers themselves make it difficult to use
these activities, or the teachers do not have sufficient time or resources to prepare
the necessary materials, and are forced to use exercises which are easily prepared
and easily applied to any text. Unfortunately, these are not enjoyed by the students
and are yet another nail in the coffin of the reader. The solution seems to be
easy—include in the body of the reader (e.g. after each chapter) activities which
are designed to stimulate the students and to help them understand the text, and
to assist them in achieving some of their expectations regarding vocabulary etc.
Teachers almost unanimously wished to see more activities provided, and both
teachers and students preferred more pictures to be included in the readers.

Development

In an attempt to produce a reader which would fulfil the requirements of both the
teachers and the students, the following format was adopted. The story was to be
set in present-day Hong Kong, using real locations. Everywhere mentioned would
exist (i.e. every detail, including roundabouts, pathways, streams etc.) and would
be easily found on a local map. To give the reader relevance the story was to be
concerned with a very topical issue—in the event, that of the question of Viet-
namese refugees. The topic should (and this one did) create a good deal of genuine
response and interest on the part of the students—they really did want to express
their opinions on the subject. Also, it is a common complaint about readers used
in Hong Kong that they are lacking in mature comment about issues which are of
concern to society in general. The themes were to be presented within a plot
which, it was hoped, would capture the imagination of most students. It could be
loosely classified as an ‘adventure story’, certainly involving characters of the same
age group as the students and including many of the themes which are usually of
interest to young people—e.g. escape from imprisonment, survival in a difficult
environment, good against evil, moral dilemmas.

Of course, readers can be used to stimulate activities which concentrate on many
different skills of a language (e.g. role play for oral skills, listening exercises). It was decided that this reader would concentrate on using the contents to develop various writing skills. The reasons for this were both practical and pedagogical. Given the restrictions the teaching environment imposes on the teacher in Hong Kong (size of class, size and arrangement of classrooms, restrictions on noise levels etc.), written activities are popular. Also, the students would perceive the activities as being worthwhile if they concentrated on writing—because of examination requirements—so they would probably be generally receptive to them. I also wanted to produce a series of activities which could almost be used by the students without much teacher intervention (again for use in other classes) and it would be easier to do this with writing skills.

Although the students are exposed to a great deal of input on writing, the usual type of work is very segmented and contextless. I wanted to design activities which were linked and meaningful—in the sense that they had both a context and a genuine purpose other than simply to write in English. I hoped in this way to improve the students’ ability in composition writing. Some of the activities are designed to encourage them to think creatively and then write what they have ‘thought’ in more imaginative language. This seemed to be particularly suitable as many of the students feel quite involved with the writing of the reader itself—which gives an added context to the activities.

The activities were designed in a fairly systematic way, with chapters building one onto another where possible. Each chapter isolates a particular aspect of writing, i.e. a particular skill or a particular structure/lexical item which I felt could usefully be practised and, through the context of the reader, gives examples of/practice in production of each. Therefore each chapter follows a similar format:

1. Presentation of text.
2. Activities designed to develop (and assess) reading skills such as skimming, scanning and intensive reading for detailed information.
3. The isolation of a specific feature deliberately emphasised in the text of the chapter (e.g. intensifiers, adjectives, dialogues, connectives) and structured practice in the feature.
4. A more open, but still guided, opportunity for the students to use the feature in short pieces of writing.

Throughout the book pictures/illustrations have been used as much as possible—not only to support the text but, more frequently, to foster interest in the activities and stimulate creativity on the part of the students. The use of pictures was designed to enable the students to enjoy and benefit from the activities without being overwhelmed or hindered by the large verbal input they usually require:
... non-verbal information is useful because it makes possible a number of techniques for promoting and checking comprehension. Transfer of information activities ... not only are interesting in themselves, but also may enable the student to demonstrate the meaning of the text in ways that do not involve him in the use of words. (Nuttall 1982:53)

Before each chapter a pre-reading activity is used, either to generate interest in the text or to focus attention on the structures/features to be highlighted at the end of the chapter. These do not appear in the text of the reader, as they can vary according to the specific aims of the teacher in a particular lesson.

The choice of the language used in the reader was initially restricted to those features itemised in the syllabus for schools in Hong Kong, but I found in some cases that these were too restrictive. The choice of vocabulary was made largely by intuition, from a list of headwords I had acquired from the publisher. If I was in any doubt about a structure or an item of vocabulary it was a simple task to check if the students were familiar with it!

One of the students in my class, Lee Ming-kam, was used as the artist for the activities. This had several benefits apart from the fact that she is an excellent artist with a fine sense of humour—which is conveyed in her artwork. After I had completed the text for one chapter, I ‘piloted’ it on the artist and made any amendments that seemed necessary. I then explained each of the activities and described the required artwork (see Appendix). At this stage several of the proposed activities were rejected and replaced because they were found to be too difficult or too easy, or not really interesting. In some instances the original idea of the activity was slightly altered (unintentionally) when the artwork was done. I deliberately left the alterations as they obviously reflected the perception of the student. In fact, the central character in the reader, as well as several of the incidents, changed slightly when I saw the artwork. In a way the process followed the opposite route to that followed when writing a novel. Within the framework of plot and character, which was deliberately kept rather loose, I was led by the students and in particular by the artwork. Each chapter was presented on completion so the next chapter was influenced by the students’ reactions to the first. In some instances I really did not know what was going to be in a chapter until after the class had read and worked on the preceding one. As the class knew this to be happening they became very involved in the story as they felt they could influence the outcome—which they genuinely could. Activities such as prediction obviously became very real and the whole range of activities of personal responses, e.g. “What would you do...?” were authentic in the sense that they affected what the
central character would do. However, the students did not actually know what would happen in the next chapter until they were given it—they did not write the reader, they only influenced it. This seemed to add interest and suspense to the exercise of reading the book. The only person who did know what was going to happen was the artist and she refused to give away any information—though she was, apparently, constantly asked for advance information.

At the end of the book is a newspaper cutting giving an unexpected twist to the story (and perhaps a hint of authenticity?). In effect, as well as providing the ending to the story, this cutting is a summary of the whole plot. Summary work is perhaps too difficult at this (Form 3) level and it seems a shame to spoil a book for the students by asking them to write a summary, as seems to be popular with many teachers. Therefore the inclusion of the summary here not only provides the opportunity for more comprehensible work to be done on this skill, it also pre-empts teachers who give summary work as an automatic end-of-reader activity!

**CONCLUSION**

The overall result of the reader (Smallwood 1989) was very satisfactory. The students appeared to enjoy the text and certainly enjoyed the activities. Even the poorer students in the class became involved in them and the class discussions. The students said that they found dialogue easier to follow and more interesting than narrative prose. Nothing could be done to alter this without a complete re-writing—but this is obviously a point to remember for the design of any future readers. The text introduced many new vocabulary items, and footnotes would have been useful as, in effect, the students added their own. The exercises were well received and needed no changes. Some of them were found to be very difficult but this did not detract from their appeal. Many of the activities proved very suitable for pair work, which made them even more attractive.
APPENDIX Sample activities from the original class version of Freedom
(The artwork was executed by Lee Ming-kam, a Form 3 student.)

PICTURE QUIZ: Look at the pictures and write down any mistakes in them.

A) ________________________
B) ________________________
C) ________________________
D) ________________________
Now add "colour" to each of these pictures. Write a sentence for each picture using different adjectives to make the description as interesting as you can.
The development of a reader for schools in Hong Kong

Ian Smallwood

References