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CHOOSING THE ADEQUATE LEVEL OF GRADED READERS - PRELIMINARY STUDY

Abstract: Graded readers have been used as second language teaching material since the end of the Second World War. They are an important source of simplified material which provides comprehensible input on all levels. It is of crucial importance for a successful usage of graded readers in the classroom and in studies which focus on graded readers, that an adequate level of graded readers is chosen. In this paper the following will be explored: the theoretical background of choosing the adequate level of graded readers, explanation of the criteria for placement of graded readers in different levels, the differences in levels between the most important publishers and the selection of the adequate level of the graded readers. Furthermore, this paper presents preliminary research results, the goal of which was to test whether assigned CEFR levels represent a sufficient criterion for the selection of graded readers without previously testing reading skills or using tests provided by the graded reader publishers. Six subjects participated in the research; they were divided into three levels of English language knowledge (A2, B1, C1). Each participant read one and listened to another graded reader. In this research an interview was used for gathering data, the key component of which were text and audio material comprehension questions. The results showed that not all graded readers used in the study were adequate and that there are grounds for conducting further research with a larger sample.

Key words: graded readers, choosing the adequate level, publishers, input.

Introduction

Graded readers have for a long time been an unavoidable addition to the school library. Although many authors claim that the positive effects of using graded readers as reading material in extensive and intensive reading programs as well as extensive listening have long since been known and confirmed (Claridge 2011, Bell 2001), extensive reading programs in Serbia are a rare occurrence, although they are very popular in Asia. Unfortunately, in Serbia graded readers are seldom used in class, and are most frequently used only with highly motivated students.

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During Bachelor and Master studies at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, where there are many high quality subjects dealing with foreign language teaching methodology, the usage of graded readers is not covered. This topic is also rare at scientific conferences and seminars which are organized in our region. Because of this many language teachers are not familiar with the theory behind the usage of graded readers and the possibilities which they provide.

In this paper we will try to introduce to the reader some of the main information which is needed for appropriate and efficient usage of this teaching material. Graded readers are divided into levels based on the number of word families, grammatical constructions, syntax and plot. The focus in this paper is on choosing the adequate level of GR with the accent on vocabulary. In this paper the following will be discussed: the theoretical background, various level division types of graded readers, the criteria on the basis of which graded readers are divided into levels and a primary research to see if a selection of graded readers on the basis of CEFR levels is adequate.

Theoretical background

Graded readers have been used from the 1950's, and their popularity has been connected to the work of Michael West and his General Word List (West, 1953), which contains the 2000 most frequent words of the English language (Bell, 2001). Considering that graded readers are made up of simplified vocabulary which is based on word frequency, West recommends using GR for establishing vocabulary which has already been met and to increase the learners' motivation when they see what they can do/understand with the vocabulary which they had already learned (Wodinsky & Nation, 1988).

Krashen's second language acquisition (L2A) theory had a strong influence on the popularity of graded readers. Here the key subject of relevance is the Input Hypothesis which is one of 5 main hypothesis that make up Krashen's second language acquisition theory. In order to understand the Input Hypothesis one must first be familiar with the other four, which are:

1. The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis
2. The Natural Order Hypothesis – people acquire language rules in a specific order, some rules are acquired earlier some latter, and all of this independently of formal instruction.
3. The Monitor Hypothesis – the ability to speak in a foreign language is the result of language acquisition, formal language learning serves only the purpose of monitoring and correcting the production if a rule has been learned before it has been acquired. Production is never a result of learning.
4. The Affective Filter Hypothesis – the affective filter is a mental block which prevents the input from reaching the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). It is “up” when the learner is stressed, unmotivated, has a low self-esteem... Only when the affective filter is lowered can language acquisition occur (Krashen, 1985).

According to the Input Hypothesis a language is acquired only when messages are understood, i.e. through comprehensive input. People develop language skills in a natural order by understanding input which contains structures and vocabulary which are in the next phase of development. In other words input which contains $i+1$ element (i – our current level, $i+1$ the next lever in the natural order). Comprehensive input is a necessary precondition for language acquisition but it is not enough, the affective filter also needs to be “lowered” (Krashen, 1995).

In many of his papers Krashen (2015, 2013a, 2004a, 2004b, Krashen & Chang 1997, Krashen & Cho 1995, Rodrigo et al., 2003) highlights the positive effect of reading on L2A. Graded readers are a rich source of comprehensible input; hence they present an important element in free reading programs such as extensive reading programs, silent reading and self-selected reading programs (Rodrigo et al. 2003).

In Krashen's (2013a) view the most important conditions for reading material and, therefore, graded readers as well, is that they are interesting and written with the aim to communicate with the reader. This is the main idea of The Compelling Input Hypothesis. He considers that every interesting text automatically contains $i+1$ input without the need for its conscious insertion (Krashen, 2009). The same comprehensive input can serve as a source of $i+1$ input for learners of different levels. In texts as well as in caretaker speech elements above $i+1$ level are always present. These elements are called $i+n$ level, i.e. "noise". The presence of noise will not hinder communication, nor will the removal of noise make the text more understandable (Krashen, 2013b). However, Krashen notices that some learners on the elementary level need complete transparency of input in the beginning. But with time teachers should lower the transparency and insist only that the text seems completely transparent. Krashen indicates "it is ok, and even desirable, that the input contain a small amount of 'noise', or $i+n$ " (Krashen, 2013b, p.8). However, he did not explain what he meant by "small amount of noise".

Krashen's focus on how compelling the text is, in comparison to formal constriction of vocabulary and grammatical structures, is obvious from his suggested solution to the problem of selecting the adequate level of reading material. He considers that learners can choose the adequate level themselves. The most efficient way to test whether a text is adequate is to give the learners a sample of the text to read and see if they can understand it. Moreover, Krashen states that it is best to use non-targeted input, which represents text which is not written with the goal to contain certain vocabulary and grammatical constructions, but the main goal of which is to be interesting and understandable to the readers (Krashen, 2004b, 2013b).

For Krashen the goal of foreign language instruction is to bring the learners to the level in which they can understand at least some authentic input. In his works he offers suggestions for adequate methods in teaching foreign languages until the intermediate level.

In comparison to Krashen's view, the work of Paul Nation (1999, 2001, 2006a, 2006b) is often addressed. Nation views graded readers from the perspective of the role which they play in the structure of foreign language learning. The main frame of L2 learning consists of 4 elements: learning from meaning-focused input, deliberate language-focused learning, learning from meaning-focused output, developing fluency (Nation, 2003). Graded readers can be used for all four elements, but have a key role in learning from meaning-focused input and fluency development. Depending on the purpose of their use different graded reader levels will be chosen.

When graded readers are used for learning from meaning-focused input the focus is on vocabulary acquisition. Graded readers here are a source of both reading and listening material especially from elementary to intermediate English language learning levels. Vocabulary learning with graded readers is accomplished when learners guess the meaning of the unknown word from context. For students to be able to guess the meaning from context three conditions need to be met: 1. Learners are familiar with 98% of vocabulary in the text, in

other words this would mean one unknown word in every fifth row; 2. Learners are exposed to large quantities of input (approximately a million words a year); 3. Conscious attention is paid to the unknown vocabulary by covering it in the classes and through deliberate language-focused learning (Nation & Meara, 2002; Nation, 2006b).

For successful fluency development a few conditions need to be met. Learners need to use material which does not contain unknown vocabulary, pressure to complete the tasks faster than usual needs to exist, and a large quantity of materials needs to be provided. Considering that L2 reading speed in most learners is well below the average reading speed of 250 words in a minute, fluency development in reading should be an important goal of L2 classes (Nation & Deweerdt, 2001, Bell, 2001).

Unsimplified text cannot be used on lower levels as adequate input for fluency development and learning from meaning-focused input since it would be filled with distractions and ambiguities. In order to get a clearer picture of the differences between simplified and authentic unsimplified texts two difficulty measures can be used: unknown vocabulary density in the text and the number of unknown words in the text. In his research Nation (Nation & Deweerdt, 2001) gives an example in which he compares the authentic book *Dracula*, written by Bram Stoker, with the short version of the same book and a graded reader based on the original book *Dracula*. Vocabulary which is not in the 2000 most frequent words or proper nouns is considered to be unknown vocabulary. In the original 92.8% of words are from the 2000 most frequent words while in the short version 91.3% and in the graded reader 98.6%. Explained in a different way, this data means that in the original the learners comes across an unknown word in almost every line in the text, which does not give them enough context to guess the meaning of the word. When it comes to the number of unknown vocabulary, the original has 3822 unknown words, the short version 530 and the graded reader 30. If we take every unknown word as a potential problem in the understanding of the text, in the short version, there are 530 potential problems. In graded readers if unknown vocabulary is inserted, it is usually a word which is essential for the plot and it is repeated many times.

Repetition is used to increase the probability that the targeted word will be acquired. Nation recommends 10 repetitions but supports the rule of thumb: the more repetitions the better. According to Nation 7 graded readers per level are needed for the learners to come across the words frequently enough. Since we need to take into account the factor of forgetting, one graded reader needs to be read a week so that the time period before a word is met again is not too long. Considering that graded readers are designed as a cumulative process the vocabulary from the previous level is repeated in the next level (words from the first level are repeated in the second, words in the first and second level are repeated in the third etc.). Moreover, words appear more frequently on the subsequent levels than on the levels in which they are first introduced. Graded readers are not designed for the learning of new vocabulary but for establishing previously learned vocabulary and grammar constructions. This is why new words will actually be established on the next level (Nation & Ming-tzu, 1999)

Graded readers represent a bridge which enables L2 learners to practice their reading skills and build their vocabulary until they can read and listen to authentic text. If we start from the assumption that 98% of vocabulary in a text needs to be understood for the text to be comprehensible, than a vocabulary of 8000-9000 word families is needed for the understanding of written text and a vocabulary of 6000-7000 word families for the understanding of spoken language (Nation, 2006b). However, when we look at the number of

word families in the highest levels of graded readers (Oxford Bookworms 2500, Penguin readers 3000, Cambridge English Readers 3800, Macmillan Readers 2200, Collins COBUILD 1700) they are well below the goal of 8000-9000 word families. An exception are the *Oxford Progressive English Readers* in which the number of word families on the highest level is 5000, but even this is under the goal of 8000-9000 word families which are needed to for an authentic written text (Nation 2006b, Schmitt & Schmitt 2012). Nation considers that graded readers should be written to fill this gap.

The division of graded readers into levels

Graded readers are divided into levels based on the number of word families, grammatical constructions, syntax and plot. Although the number of word families is useful when graded readers from the same publisher are used, complications arise when graded readers from different publishers are used. Namely different publishers have their own word lists which they use for writing graded readers.

Nation and Ming-tzu (1999) compared Oxford's word list used for the writing of Oxford Bookworms graded reader series and the General Word List (West, 1953) to conclude the two lists matched in 84.7% of the words. Wan-a-rom (2008) compared the Oxford with the Cambridge word list as a whole and on each level (both publishers have 6 levels of graded readers). The Oxford list contains 2257 words, while Cambridge word list contains 3055, i.e. 800 words more. The number of word families in the first three levels is very similar (the difference for the I level is 19 words, for the II level 27 and for the III 6 words), while the difference is greater in higher levels (IV – 235, V – 482, VI - 798). These two lists overlap in 2122 word families, 135 words occur only in the Oxford list while 933 occur only in the Cambridge list. These differences are mainly the result of the different number of words in the lists while the selection of words and their division in levels is similar. Wan-a-rom also compared these two word lists to the General Word List (West, 1953). Oxford word list matches the first 1000 words in 93.03% which means 921 word families, and the second 1000 words match 76% i.e. 741 word families. When comparing to the whole General Word List they match in 84.62% of word families. Cambridge word list matches the first 1000 word families in 96.16% and the second 1000 in 82.31% of word families. It matches with the whole General Word List in 89.31%. As can be deduced from the information above, differences between the word lists exist and are not to insignificant, therefore they hinder the comparison of graded readers based on the number of word families. For the usage of graded readers to be efficient teachers, in extensive reading programs, should use the graded readers from one publisher and librarians should separately group graded readers from different publishers (Wan-a-rom, 2008).

Different publishers divide graded readers into a different number of levels. Not even the levels are universal and therefore the same level in different publishers contains a different number of word families. In table one the number of graded reader levels, CEFR levels and number of word families are presented. As can be seen in Table 1 the number of levels even differs in two graded reader series of the same publisher. Oxford Bookworms series has 6 levels + starter, while Oxford Progressive English Readers has 5 levels without the starter phase. Furthermore the number of word families in these levels do not match, which brings us to a conclusion that even different series of the same publishers should be separately grouped in libraries.

Table 1. The division of graded readers in graded reader levels, CEFR levels and number of word families used

Oxford Bookworms	Starter A1 250	1 Level A1/A2 400	Level 2 A2/B1 700	Level 3 B1 1000	Level 4 B1/B2 1400	Level 5 B2 1800	Level 6 B2/C1 2500
Penguin readers Pearson	Easy start A1 200	Level 1 A1 300	Level 2 A2 600	Level 3 A2 1200	Level 4 B1 1700	Level 5 B2 2300	Level 6 C1 3000
Cambridge English Readers	Starter A1 200	Level 1 A1 400	Level 2 A1/A2 800	Level 3 A2 1300	Level 4 B1 1900	Level 5 B2 2800	Level 6 C1 3800
Macmillan Readers	Starter A1 300	Level 1 A1 600	Level 2 A2 1100	Level 3 A2-B1 1400	Level 4 B1 1600	Level 5 C1 2200	/
Collins COBUILD	Level 1 A2 700	Level 2 A2-B1 900	Level 3 B1 1100	Level 4 B2 1700	/	/	/
Oxford Progressive English Readers ⁴	Level 1 1400	Level 2 2100	Level 3 3100	Level 4 3700	Level 5 5000	/	/

Most publishers add information, on their internet pages or sometimes on the graded readers, about which Common European Reference for Language (CEFR) level the graded reader is suitable for. This fact should ease teachers' and learners' graded reader selection process and comparison of graded readers from different publishers. However when we look at the data from Table 1 we can see that even here we have many mismatches and irregularities. For example graded readers with 1400 word families in Oxford Bookworms are marked as being B1/B2 level while in Macmillan they are marked as being A2/B1 level. This is just one of many inconsistencies which are visible in Table 1. Additional confusion can be caused by the fact that Cambridge English Readers for their standard printed and audio graded readers have 6 levels and the starter level while the interactive graded readers have 7 levels and a starter. Teachers who use CEFR levels for the selection of graded readers also need to pay attention to the number of word families used in the reader because, for example, Penguin readers marked with CEFR level A2 are books for both Penguin graded reader level 2(600 word families) and 3(1200 word families).

In this situation the teachers can accidentally give the students first a more complicated and then an easier reader if they are only paying attention to the CEFR levels.

Based on this generalized data it can be concluded that clear criteria for the division of graded readers into the CEFR levels needs to be established. All publishers would need to follow these criteria so that the usage of graded readers from the same CEFR level of different publishers could be possible.

⁴ For this graded reader series the publishers did not specify the CEFR levels.

Criteria for the selection of adequate graded readers

If we approach the problem from Nation's standpoint, the level of graded readers that we will choose depends on what we want to accomplish with the graded reader. If we want to establish vocabulary which has already been taught 98-100% of vocabulary should be familiar to the learners. If we want the learners to learn new vocabulary they need to be familiar with 98% of the vocabulary (Nation 2006b, Maruyama 2009). The word list for a specific level, which is used for the writing of graded readers, contains all of the words which are supposed to be learned on that level. If the learner has just started an intermediate language course, one cannot expect the learner to know all of the vocabulary anticipated for that level. Hence, one can reach a conclusion that graded readers one level below should be given so that the learners can read the text without comprehension problems. Moreover, while researching how strictly graded reader writers adhere to the word lists, Wan-a-rom (2008) found out that in Oxford bookworms more 98% of the vocabulary was from the word lists, but that the writers also used words from the higher levels. For the lowest level 1, results showed that writers did not adhere to the lists closely enough; less than 95% of the vocabulary used was from the list while only 83% of the vocabulary was designated for the first level in the word list. For the higher levels the number of familiar vocabulary was between 97-98% which is satisfactory. In this research it can also be noticed that every graded reader has a number of words which are not in the word list. For the 6 studied Oxford bookworms graded readers the percentage of these words is 1.43%. If we consider this information it can be concluded that new vocabulary learning happens on every level, even when our aim is development of fluency.

If we approach the problem from Krashen's point of view, the most important precondition is that the text be enthralling, if this condition is fulfilled than "a little" $i+n$ level i.e. noise can be tolerated (Krashen, 2013b). Whether we can understand this noise as the allowed 2% of unknown vocabulary which Nation suggests is unclear since Krashen does not specify what this "a little" entails.

It is important that Krashen's $i+1$ is not understood literally to mean that we should give students graded readers which are one level above the one which they are currently studying. It is also important that Krashen's $i+1$ is not understood as equivalent to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. In the zone of proximal development a distinction is made between what learners can achieve alone with some learning material and what they can achieve with the help of more competent individuals and the material (for a more detailed discussion on this topic please view Dunn & Lantolf, 1998).

Krashen's approach to selecting the adequate graded reader level is used by the publishing house Collins. On their site learners can check which graded reader level they need. First they click on the level which they think is right for them, then they receive a short extract for the selected level, if it is easy they try a level higher, if it is difficult they try a lower level. They should choose the last understandable level (www.collins.co.uk).

However, vocabulary tests are a much more common way for selecting adequate reading material. Since text difficulty is strictly controlled in graded readers, vocabulary tests are very useful for level selection of graded readers as numerous studies have shown (Koda 1989, Nagy 1988, Nation and Coady 1988 as cited in Wan-a-rom, 2010a). Vocabulary test results are compared to the number of words which are used for a certain level. Cambridge offers an

online test for the selection of graded readers – the test consists of connecting the word with the definition (www.cambridge.org). Oxford does the same except the test is in the form of a multiple choice gap fill exercise (www.elt.oup.com). Oxford Progressive English readers, however, use the same test type as mentioned above for Collins, except here the learners need to count the number of unknown words in the text and on the basis of that see if they need to read a text above or below or if this is the right level for them (www.oupchina.com.hk, Wan-a-rom, 2010b). Macmillan uses a variety of questions based on multiple choice, but what is specific for this publisher is that both grammar and vocabulary knowledge are tested (www.macmillanreaders.com). All of the above mentioned tests can be implemented in class with computers or mobile phones (Gabor & Peter, 2015). Penguin readers test is based on multiple choice, it is divided in levels but unlike the previous tests needs to be downloaded (www.penguinreaders.com).

Research

As it has been mentioned in the previous part of the paper, graded readers are divided into levels based on the number of word families used, but the publishers also divide the readers into CEFR levels. The most effective way of selecting the adequate level of graded readers is to use tests which the publishing houses have made available on their websites. However, because of the infrequent usage of graded readers in Serbia and the low level of awareness about how they should be used, many teachers are not aware that the aforementioned tests exist, hence choose the graded reader levels based solely on the assigned CEFR levels. The goal of this paper is to determine whether CEFR levels can be used for an efficient selection of graded readers as reading and listening materials. The selection of the adequate level of graded readers is essential for efficient implementation of this material in class and for the validity of research (Wan-a-rom, 2010a, 2010b).

This research will also explore whether cultural differences pose a problem for comprehension to Serbian learners. This element posed a problem for Japanese students, in the study conducted by Gills-Furikata (2015). In comparison to Japan, Serbia is a European country in which the Anglophone culture has a strong influence. Therefore, it is interesting to test the influence of the cultural element in this research. Graded readers were selected so that at least one on every level had strong cultural elements which play a key role for the understanding of the story.

Since many differences in the levels division exist among publishers, even when CEFR levels are concerned, in this research graded readers from one publisher were used, namely Pearson-Longman the Penguin Graded Readers.

The research, whose research results are presented in this paper, is a case study, which serves as a preliminary study. The total number of participants is 6 (4 women and 2 men). Participants were divided into 3 groups depending on their proficiency in the English language (A2 level – 2 participants, B1 level – 2 participants, C1 level – 2 participants). At the time the research was conducted the participants were taking a language course for their aforementioned levels, before the start of the courses they had taken a placement test (English Unlimited Placement Test – Cambridge University Press 2010).

For each level two graded readers from the Penguin Graded Readers series were selected. The selected graded readers have a printed and an audio version. For A2 level the used books were *How to be an Alien* and *The Black Cat and Other Stories*; B1 level *Teacher Man* and

Strangers on a Train; C1 level *The Remains of the Day* and *North and South*. The participants needed to read one graded reader and listen to the other. Since we have two participants and two books per level, if, for example, B2 level participant 1 read *Teacher Man* and listened to *Strangers on a Train* than participant 2 read *Strangers on a Train* and listened to *Teacher Man*. This reversal was done for the participants of other levels as well.

Two instruments were used for the research: interview and reading/listening comprehension questions, which were created for the purpose of this research. Five comprehension questions were chosen for each book on the basis of which the understanding of the read text or listened audio material would be tested. The comprehension questions were open and referred to the story line and general relationships among the characters, not to details from the text. They were posed orally during the interview and represent a crucial part of the interview. Questions which served as guidelines for the interview were divided into 4 groups: 1. General questions about reading and listening habits; 2. Questions about the experience of reading and listening; 3. Asking the participants to give a plot summary and 4. Section in which the participants gave answers to the aforementioned comprehension questions. The participants could choose if they wanted the interview to be held in English or Serbian. All of the interviews were recorder, with the permission of the participants, and latter transcribed. The interview was used to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are the participants listening and reading habits like? – if participants love reading and listening, if they do this often and with a variety of genres and topics, the possibility is higher that they will successfully understand graded readers. This is because experienced readers/listeners developed techniques which aid in these processes (Claridge, 2011). Moreover their affective filter is “lowered” since they consider reading/listening inherently enjoyable (Krashen, 1997)
2. How did the participants experience the reading/listening? – was it interesting, could they enjoy the process, did they have to rewind the audio material, use dictionaries or translate parts of the text into the native language to understand the text? The answers to these questions are connected to both the affective filter and text comprehensibility, i.e. the unknown vocabulary density and number.
3. Could they follow the story line? – this was tested through the students plot summaries, sub-questions during the interview and reading/listening comprehension questions, all of which contributed to a comprehensive understanding. The plot summary was graded based on whether the participants correctly understood the story line, how many details they gave and whether they understood the implications in the text.
4. Whether cultural elements posed problems in the understanding of the graded readers?
5. How the speakers’ accent and speed of speech influenced the participants understanding of the audio books? – These two listening elements pose the largest problems in the students’ understanding of audio material (Zeng, 2007 as cited in Renadaya & Farrell, 2010).
6. Was the understanding of reading and listening equally understandable? – learners often experience listening as harder and more demanding in comparison to reading (Bacon 1989, Farrell & Mallard 2006 as cited in Renadaya & Farrell 2010, Ucan, 2010).
7. Did they consider reading and listening to graded readers helpful to their language development? – according to Krashen the usage of graded readers is needed until the learner is capable of understanding at least some authentic input and anticipates graded reader usage until the intermediate level (Krashen, 2013a, 2013b). While

Nation considers that we should not only use graded readers on all levels but that the gap between the 5000 word families in the highest level graded reader and the 7000-9000 word families which are needed for the understanding of authentic input (Nation, 2006b). With this question we will see if the students on all levels and especially on C1 consider graded readers useful.

Result analysis

A2 level

Participant 1a is a highly educated individual who reads books for pleasure every day and often reads scientific articles (from medicine) and newspapers in English. Furthermore in her free time she writes poetry and often watches movies in English without subtitles.

Participant 1a read the book *The Black Cat and Other Short Stories*. She found the book enjoyable and was able to follow the story line without problems, but she had to stop to look up unknown vocabulary fairly often. A few times she needed to translate a part of the text in order to understand it. In both books she noticed cultural elements but they did not pose a problem for comprehension. When she gave the plot summary it was clear that she understood the story line without any problems. She correctly answered all five reading comprehension questions.

When it comes to the audio book (*How to be an Alien*) she considered it witty. The speaker's accent was a little bit difficult, since it was British and she was used to American English. Generally the speaker's speed was acceptable, but in a few parts the speaker spoke too fast. She needed to rewind a part of the audio book in order to understand certain segments. She used the dictionary while listening and reading graded reader. She had no problems understanding the story line which was also clear from her plot summary. Two questions from the comprehension questions she answered correctly, one incorrectly, one partially and one she could not remember. She liked reading graded readers more because she could advance at her own pace and pay more attention to the parts which she finds interesting. Furthermore while she was listening it was sometimes hard to hear "where one word stops and the next one begins". Both activities were evaluated as helpful to her language learning.

Participant 2a likes to read books in her free time. Depending on how much free time she has, she reads one to two books a month. She often watches movies and TV series in English with subtitles but says "when the plot is very interesting I completely disregard the titles and just listen".

Participant 2a read *How to be an Alien*. She liked the story and the fact that it is witty. She came across one unfamiliar word but guessed its meaning from the illustration in the book. In order to understand the text she did not need to use the dictionary or translate parts of the text into Serbian. Since the central theme of this graded reader are cultural differences, she noticed many and had no trouble understanding the story line, which was clear from her plot summary. All five comprehension questions were answered correctly.

Participant 2a listened to the graded reader *The Black Cat and Other Short Stories*, which was interesting to her. Although she was more used to the American accent she had no trouble understanding the British accent of the speaker. The speaker spoke too fast for her and she had to rewind the recording many times. From her plot summary it was clear that she had

understood the story line. Three comprehension questions she answered correctly, one she answered partially and one she answered incorrectly. It was easier and more enjoyable for participant 2a to read the graded reader. She was not used to listening to stories and mentioned how it is easier for her to recognize a word when she sees it. Both reading and listening were considered useful. Listening was useful because she could imitate the words and in that way practice pronunciation.

B1 level

Participant 1b is highly educated and often reads scientific papers in Serbian for her job. She reads approximately two books a month in Serbian, but rarely has a chance to read in English. She often watches movies and TV series in English but with subtitles.

Participant 1b described the reading of the graded reader as enjoyable and interesting, she connected to the topic and found the process positively challenging. While reading the graded reader (*Teacher Man*) she did not have any problems understanding the story, she came across only one word “whose meaning I couldn’t guess from the context and had to check in the dictionary”. She did not need to translate any parts into Serbian to understand them. She noticed cultural differences, but had no problems understanding them, since as she pointed out during her language learning she had had ample opportunities to become familiar with the Anglophone culture. She correctly answered all 5 comprehension questions.

Participant 1b listened to the graded reader *Strangers on a Train*. He speakers accent and speed of speech did not cause difficulties. She needed to rewind the recording two times, but stated that it was “more because of my lack of concentration than the speed of speech”. In the beginning, the listening was strenuous, because a large quantity of information was given, and the listener had not gotten used to the speaker and listening yet. It was clear from the plot summary that she had understood the storyline. She correctly answered all five listening comprehension questions. She considers both graded readers equally understandable and useful to her foreign language learning, although she remembered less when she listened to the audio graded reader.

Participant 2b frequently reads in Serbian and English due to work obligations. She rarely reads books for pleasure, approximately one book in two months. Sometimes she watches films and TV series in English, always with subtitles, but she tries to listen to the language.

Participant 2b read the graded reader *Strangers on a Train*. She considered the reader interesting. She encountered unknown vocabulary, but she did not look up the words in a dictionary because she could follow the story line. While reading, when she encountered unknown words, she paused and tried to deduce their meaning from the context. She did not need to translate parts of the text into Serbian to understand them. Cultural differences were noticed in both graded readers, but they did not pose a problem for understanding. It was clear from the plot summary that she had understood the story line. She correctly answered 4 reading comprehension questions, while the answer to one question was partially correct.

She considered the audio graded reader *Teacher Man* interesting and witty. The speaker’s accent was easily understandable. At work she frequently speaks to foreigners in English, but has problems understanding them, since they speak quickly. Consequently, she greatly enjoyed the audio graded reader where she understood everything with no problems. She did

not need to rewind the recordings in order to understand them. From the plot summary it was clear that she had understood the storyline. She correctly answered all five listening comprehension questions. In her opinion listening and reading graded readers was equally useful for her language learning.

C1 level

Participant 1c rarely reads books, approximately two books a year, but reads articles on the internet in Serbian and English every day. He watches films and TV series in English very often, sometimes with English subtitles, but never with Serbian subtitles.

Participant 1c considers the graded reader *Remains of the Day* interesting, especially the historical period in which the plot is set. He easily followed the story line, while the constant changes from the present to the past, for him, made the book more interesting. He encountered one word, the meaning of which he could not guess from the context and needed to look it up in a dictionary (*dustpan* was the word in question). From the plot summary it was clear that he had understood the storyline. Specific about this participant, is that he talked about elements in the graded readers which were not explicitly stated but which needed to be inferred from the context, which indicates a deep understanding of the material. All five reading understanding questions were answered correctly.

He did not like the genre of the book *North and South*, but considered it informative. The accent was understandable and he liked the voice changes. The speech speed was too slow, which he found annoying. He did not encounter unknown vocabulary, but he needed to rewind the initial few audio recordings because it was hard to follow the storyline until he learned the names of the characters. He noticed many cultural differences in both graded readers. As he stated: “ I didn’t know that such a big difference between North and South, these cultural differences were the most interesting”. From the plot summary it was clear that he had understood the story line. He correctly answered all 5 listening comprehension questions. Both graded readers, in his opinion, were equally useful for his language learning, primarily because of the vocabulary. Reading was more enjoyable because it was faster; he formed a better connection with the characters and imagined the world of the book more easily. While listening he did not like that: “I am not looking at anything” and that he would lose his concentration more easily. He assessed listening and reading as equally interesting.

Participant 2c approximately reads one book in two months, at work he often communicates and reads texts in English. He frequently watches TV series and movies in English without subtitles.

Participant 2c has read the book *North and South*. He did not find the book interesting. He did not encounter unknown vocabulary. He noticed cultural differences in both graded readers, but they did not pose a problem for understanding. From the summary it was clear that he had understood the story line. He answered correctly to 3 reading comprehension questions and two he answered incorrectly.

The audio book *Remains of the Day* was more enjoyable for him. The speaker’s accent and speed did not pose a problem for understanding. He encountered one unknown word (*banter*) but latter understood it from the context because it had been repeated many times. From the plot summary it was clear that he had understood the storyline, but also that he had

paid less attention to reading and listening in comparison to other participants, because he had remembered less details. Three listening comprehension questions he answered correctly, one incorrectly and he could not remember the answer to one. In his opinion listening is more enjoyable, but it is more difficult to stay concentrated. Participant 2c considers that reading and listening to the aforementioned graded readers did not help his language development because “I have learned only one new word”.

Table 2. Answers to the reading/listening comprehension questions

Level	Participant	Reading comprehension questions				Listening comprehension questions			
		Correct	Incorrect	Partially	Forgotten	Correct	Incorrect	Partially	Forgotten
A2	1	5	/	/	/	2	1	1	1
	2	5	/	/	/	3	1	1	/
B1	1	5	/	/	/	5	/	/	/
	2	4	/	1	/	5	/	/	/
C1	1	5	/	/	/	5	/	/	/
	2	3	2	/	/	3	1	/	1

Conclusion

On the basis of the generalized research findings it can be concluded that, for participants whose English language level was A2, the selected graded readers were the adequate level for the purpose of vocabulary learning. Analyzed separately, participant 1a frequently needed to stop in order to find unknown vocabulary, although she regularly reads authentic texts in her field of work. In this case the frequent pauses to check the vocabulary, on the one hand, can be explained by the fact that the participants had not received instruction on reading techniques before the research. On the other hand, the need for complete transparency could be a consequence of the participant’s character and her previous traditional experience in English language learning. Since the participant stated that she had found the reading process enjoyable and since she correctly answered all of the reading comprehension questions, it can be concluded that the same assigned graded reader level based solely CEFR levels was adequate for the purpose of learning new vocabulary. However, for the goal of fluency development, for this participant, one level lower would have probably been more appropriate. On the other hand, both research participants, whose level of English language knowledge was A2, had difficulties understanding audio graded readers. They needed to listen to the same audio recording more than once and it was hard for them “to hear the where one word ends and the other starts”. The speed of the audio graded reader was frequently too fast for their understanding. Although the text summary showed that they had understood the storyline, the A2 level participants made mistakes in the listening comprehension questions. Hence, it could be concluded that the same CEFR level, as the only criteria for the selection of adequate audio graded reader levels in neither adequate when the focus is on vocabulary learning, nor for fluency development. From these results we can also see how the same graded reader is felt as more difficult in the audio form.

For the participants whose general level of the English language knowledge was at B1 level according to the CEFR, graded readers, to which the same CEFR level was assigned, were

adequate for vocabulary development as reading and listening material. Since participant 2b needed to make pauses and read again certain parts in order to guess the unknown vocabulary from context, a lower level of graded readers would have probably been more adequate for the development of reading fluency.

For participants whose CEFR level of English knowledge is C1 the assigned graded readers of the same level were adequate for fluency development as both listening and reading material. Participant 1c complained that speech was too slow in the audio book, but he stated that both experiences positively influenced learning and language development. This indicates that a graded reader of a higher level or an authentic text would be more adequate for the aforementioned participant. Participant 2c, although he understood the graded readers, showed less interest in listening and reading activities, which was also reflected in his answers to the reading/listening comprehension questions. The fact that he considered the activities useless for his language development can serve as an explanation for his lack of enthusiasm and poor results in the comprehension questions.

The number of words which the participants considered unknown and their statement that only one word was unknown are certainly not reliable methods for determining the number of encountered unknown vocabulary. However, the goal of this paper was not to determine the number of unknown vocabulary, but to determine whether they managed to understand the graded readers and whether the vocabulary and cultural differences represented problems in understanding.

In this research cultural differences did not pose a problem in the understanding of graded readers to any of the participants.

Taking into consideration the fact that this research is a case study, it seems that the data cannot be generalized, however it can be concluded that a research with a larger sample would be useful to determine whether CEFR levels are a sufficient criterion for the selection of adequate graded readers. Furthermore, the findings indicate that there exists a higher probability of problems occurring in the selection of graded readers for lower levels when the selection is based solely on CEFR levels, i.e. the possibility of selecting an inadequate level. This preliminary research also indicates the need for further research which would answer the question whether differences exist in the graded reader selection process depending on whether the graded reader will be used as reading or listening material. A large quantity of information in the beginning of the graded readers presented a problem for participants, in several levels, when they were used as listening material. This information indicates that there perhaps exist elements in the graded readers which present problems only when the graded reader is used as listening material. This is also a question which remains open for further research.

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