Embedded Reading: a Scaffolded Approach to Teaching Reading

by Laurie Clarcq

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An embedded reading is three or more scaffolded versions of a text. It is designed to prepare students to comprehend text that the students perceive to be beyond their capability.

Embedded readings provide information in the target language in a way that actually develops the students’ reading skills. Using embedded readings not only allows students to acquire language, it provides a framework for improving reading abilities.

The first version of the text, or the baseline version, is at a basic level, easy for any student in the class to understand. It is a summary or an outline that provides a strong foundation for success. Each succeeding version of the text contains additional words, phrases or sentences that provide new information and/or details. The final version of the text is the most challenging. However, each and every version of the Embedded Reading contains the baseline version, and each subsequent version created, within it. The scaffolding of the versions builds success, confidence and interest.

What kind of text can be used as an Embedded Reading?

Embedded Readings can be created with fiction or non-fiction, poetry or prose. An Embedded Reading can be created from nearly any kind of material that we want our students to read, to comprehend, and to enjoy. Consider the list below:

Stories
Articles
Notes/messages
Conversations
Essays
Shopping lists
Novels
Poems
Song lyrics
Letters
Instructions
Advertisements/Billboards
Children’s books

Scaffolding the text serves several purposes:

a) Students are given the time and opportunity to develop a clear picture of the information provided in the reading, one step at a time.

b) Scaffolding provides opportunities for review and repetition.

c) Scaffolding provides opportunities for summary and prediction.

d) Scaffolding provides opportunities for the reader to interact intellectually and emotionally with the reading material.

The key to the scaffolding of the material is that each and every version of the reading contains the basic reading...and each subsequent level of the reading...within it.
6) The success of an Embedded Reading is dependent upon the quality of the base reading.

The shortest reading, or base reading, is the first of the scaffolded levels. It is designed to be written at a level that any student in the class could read independently and understand. Because this base reading will be included in each and every subsequent reading, the higher the quality of the base reading, the more successful students will be with ALL of the scaffolded versions. For example:

**An ant went to the ocean.**
**He saw many fish.**
**The fish swam away.**

The lower the level of the reader, the shorter the base reading will be. A base reading for beginning readers may be one short sentence. A base reading for more advanced readers might be 5-15 sentences in length. Regardless of the ability of the reader, the base reading must be concise and completely comprehensible. The second reading will be built directly from the base reading by inserting new information into the base reading:

**An ant went to the ocean to find a friend.**
**He saw many fish swimming in the ocean.**
**He said, “Hello fish!”**
**The fish swam away.**
**The poor ant!**
**Who will be his friend?**

Everything added to the base reading adds more information or more detail to the picture created by the base reading. The third reading is made by repeating the process using the second level reading.

**One day a lonely ant went to the ocean to find a friend.**
**He saw many fish swimming around in the deep blue waters of the ocean.**
**The ant thought, “Great! New friends!”**
**He said, “Hello fish!” but, unfortunately, the fish swam away.**
**The poor lonely ant was alone again!**

He walked down the beach thinking, “Why did they swim away?”

Every subsequent level includes the previous level within it. The number of levels used will depend upon the reading abilities of the students and the goals of the teacher.

**One day a lonely ant decided to make some new friends.**
**He was tired of the anthill.**
**He was tired of the anthill and tired of being just like everyone else.**
**He decided to leave the anthill to find a new life.**
**So, he moved to Hawaii.**
**The first day, he went to the beach to find a friend.**
**He saw many fish swimming around in the deep blue waters of the ocean.**
**The ant thought, “Great! New friends!”**
**He said “Hello fish!” but, unfortunately, the fish swam away.**
**The poor lonely ant was alone again!**
**He walked down the beach thinking, “Why did they swim away?”**

**He was discouraged, but he wanted to try again.** Many students in their first years of reading a language find reading in a list format, with surrounding white space like the example above, much easier to comprehend. Another way to scaffold a reading is to change it from a list format into paragraph form. Simply changing the format will make the reading more challenging. For example:

**One day a lonely ant decided to make some new friends.** **He was tired of the anthill.** **He was tired of the anthill and tired of being just like everyone else.** **He decided to leave the anthill to find a new life.** **So, he moved to Hawaii.** **The first day, he went to the beach to find a friend.** **He saw many fish swimming around in the deep blue waters of the ocean.** **The ant thought, “Great! New friends!”** **He said “Hello fish!” but, unfortunately, the fish swam away.** **The poor lonely ant was alone again!** **He walked down the beach thinking, “Why did they swim away?” Maybe they don’t speak “ant.”** **He was discouraged, but wanted to try again.**
How are Embedded Readings Created?

Bottom Up

There are two ways to create an Embedded Reading. The first is a Bottom Up reading. The Ant Story is a Bottom Up reading. The base reading was created first, and additional details and information were injected into each level.

Once a clear base reading is created use the list below for language to add to each additional level of the reading. Remember to keep the reading comprehensible to, successful for, and connected to your students.

- One complete sentence.
- A complete sentence in more than one location.
- Two adverbs that use the same ending (i.e. “ly”).
- The phrase “because, but, when, before, during, with etc.” and a new clause.
- A common interjection.
- A line from a song that students are familiar with.
- The phrases “again, once more, or one more time.”
- Chronological markers: 1st, yesterday, later.
- A familiar verb in a challenging tense or format.
- Increasingly specific details about a noun.
- Increasingly specific details about an action.
- A preposition of location and a new clause.
- A dialogue or thought line.
- Language that is introduced early and acquired late.
- Something students love.
- Something students hate.

It is also helpful to vary the difficulty of the language that is injected. By offering a variety of new information, in unexpected places, at various difficulties, all students will remain engaged in reading the text.

Student-Generated Readings

Base readings can originate from a number of sources. Subsequent levels can be created by teachers or collected from ideas that students create from a base reading. Some of the most powerful embedded readings come from student-generated materials. By giving a group of students a specific topic to write about (i.e. a movie, a book, an event or a specific individual) the teacher can cull from the students’ own work to create the Bottom Up reading. Not only will students be reading for new information and details, they will be delighted to find their own ideas and words as part of the text!

Top Down

The second way to create an Embedded Reading is from the Top Down. (Also called Backward Planning.) This approach provides a way for teachers to make literature or other text that students perceive to be beyond their capabilities, accessible to students. (Please be sure to credit the original author.)

Begin with the original version of a text that would be considered advanced, but not impossible for the students in the class. Copy and paste this version in order to have a new copy to revise. Read through the text and eliminate approximately one-fourth of the text. Choose sentences, phrases or words that can be removed without significantly altering the “picture-in-the-mind” created by the text. Eliminate throughout the text, not simply at the beginning or end. Eliminate challenging pieces and more easily recognized words and phrases.
Now repeat the process. It may be necessary to make alterations in capitalization and punctuation. Continue to repeat the process until the reading becomes a clear and comprehensible base reading. As the versions get closer and closer to a base reading, it is important to be very aware of the language that remains. It is still comprehensible? Does it still create a picture in the mind of the reader?

Now you have created a series of texts that scaffold back up to the original.

**How is an Embedded Reading Used?**

Because the reading exists in several forms, the teacher has numerous opportunities, and numerous ways, to use it with students.

**The most important place to begin with an Embedded Reading is to make sure that every student clearly understands the base reading.** In a second-language classroom this can be accomplished through any of the following:

- Illustrations
- Identification of photographs or illustrations
- Acting out the reading
- Questions about the text itself
- Questions about students’ reactions to the text
- Direct translation

When the teacher is sure that the language is totally comprehensible, it is appropriate to move on to the next reading, where any of the following activities could be used:

- Identify new information
- Consider how new information adds to or changes the reading
- Discuss why events occurred
- Predict what will happen or be added next
- Compare/Contrast base reading with more detailed versions
- Compare/Contrast the reading with other texts
- Add details to illustrations
- Use context clues to understand more complex language
- Identify language which adds suspense, humor or irony
- Change a detail, sentence or paragraph
- Add a detail, sentence, or paragraph
- Discuss the thoughts, feelings, words and actions of the characters (in fiction or non-fiction)
- Discuss the thoughts, feelings and reactions of the students in regards to the text
- Recreate the text as a script
- Rewrite a piece of the text from the perspective of a different character

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