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# A Reading-based Holistic Language Learning Program

Ananda Tilaka Sekara

*This Holistic Language Learning Program (HLLP) first grew out of the frustrations of the traditional intensive reading programs. Then, over the past fifteen years, the HLLP developed as an integral component of the larger Holistic Approach to ESL initiated at MARA Institute of Technology in 1986. It requires tertiary students studying for their diplomas or degrees to read an average of twelve self-selected magazine, newspaper or journal articles a semester and work on specific reading, writing, grammar and oral presentation tasks following a structured Holistic Language Learning Format (HLLF). Once a week, students present and discuss their articles in class. Students at Universiti Teknologi MARA have found the program extremely beneficial because much new and useful information is disseminated from so many different sources, grammatical features are studied in meaningful contexts and most importantly students are very actively involved in learning. The most useful part of the HLLP has been the "RESPONSE" section which has proved that given the freedom and opportunity students can be motivated to read, think and write excellent responses to ideas or arguments in the text. There is exposure to an unlimited amount of real language use. On the average it was found that about 5% of the students turned in excellent products, 20% very good products, 30% good products, 25% fairly good, and 20% poor products.*

## Introduction

The paper first presents preliminaries: a brief overview, students involved, objectives and rationale for the Holistic Language Learning Program (HLLP). Second, it describes the core aspects of the program which are choice of reading material, readability levels, specific Holistic Language Learning Format (HLLF), the procedures the students have to follow

and the role of the teacher. Finally, the paper puts together general findings, observations and feedback on this fifteen-year old program.

## **Program Brief**

The HLLP is an ongoing “intra-class” and “extra-class” language learning program typically for the period of a semester. Once a week, following instructions, students read an article of their choice from any source: the newspaper or magazines, and perform a variety of language-learning tasks in the areas of reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary and speaking and listening.

Over the semester students read at least 12 articles and work on specific language skills based on the aspects of academic reading and grammar points that are taught that semester. The reading features of the HLLP assignment remain essentially constant; whereas the grammatical features change according to the grammatical point taught that particular week. Students work on the HLLP assignment following a specified five-part format (HLLF) and they turn in their products every week on a specified day, Monday, for example with a photocopy of the selected articles attached.

The teacher checks the products and returns them the following week with remarks and correction. Students file up their products for an end-of-semester HLLP report.

## **Students**

The HLLP is most appropriate for advanced and intermediate level students in an ESL program at the tertiary level. It can however, be modified to suit students at the lower intermediate or elementary levels. Since 1989, 64 groups with an average of 25 students each have undergone the program at the university.

## **Objectives**

The program aims to:

- Introduce students to a holistic approach to learning language based on Gestalt Psychology.

- Encourage an independent and individualistic approach to intensive reading.
- Inculcate the reading habit simply because a vast majority of the students do not read practically anything outside their curriculum.
- Encourage wider reading for general knowledge, current affairs, and specific knowledge.
- Teach students to “**read for grammar**” that is to create a psycholinguistic awareness of the underlying aspects of the language – similar to Rutherford’s (1987) grammatical consciousness – raising.
- Help students make progress in the use of authentic language.
- Lead students into understanding the organization and structure of writing, especially academic writing
- Initiate and develop critical thinking by reading, thinking and responding to the author’s ideas and opinion.
- Improve students’ speaking, listening and oral presentation skills.

## **Rationale**

The traditional structure for the teaching of reading has been the students’ reading a given passage or extract, and answering a set of specific questions based on it. They are predetermined Wh, Multiple-choice, True/False or Matching questions. The set does not fully test comprehension of all the important information nor does it encourage critical thinking. Moreover, this traditional structure is irrelevant to learning at the tertiary academic level.

Students should be given the freedom to study an article/passage thoroughly and comprehend all important information and write it down for academic purposes. They should be able to identify main ideas and specific details, arguments, counter arguments recognize implications and the like without interference from the “constraining traditional questions.” Most important, students should be encouraged to think critically and express their opinions, and explore deeper into the problem or topic from other sources.

The following points further strengthen the rationale for the program:

- Students have the freedom to read what they want or like to read: they do not have to do it in class. It is a strategy to create “space” (Stevick: 1980) for them to pursue their goals in their own time and space.

- Students get to sample language structure in real use: not language concocted or contrived to suit instruction purposes. For example, students can be guided to see how a whole range of verb tenses is used in authentic text. They can study verb tenses holistically (Tilaka: 1991) at the discourse level rather than at the sentence level.
- Thus, it follows from the point above that a holistic approach to the study grammar is feasible. Based on Gestalt Psychology, the students are directed to perceive the whole entity first and then figure out how language is made up of regular patterned underlying building blocks. This means that the teaching of grammar moves from holistic perspective to atomistic analysis (Brouke 1989).
- Each HLLP assignment is a comprehensive, productive and cognitive effort. It involves reading, comprehending, and ultimately critical thinking. Epstein (2002) says that thinking critically is a defense against too much information and too many people trying to convince us. He adds that reasoning is what distinguishes us from beasts.
- Work done is meaningful as a result of the semantic content of the article: a strong emotional message or unusual event or story. Because the article is a complete coherent semantic unit, it forms **the contextual basis for all language activities**: the grammatical features particularly, have a definite underlay: in Gestalt terms, we can say that the “figure – ground” principle operates.
- The article becomes the basis for writing practice. Student frequently find it a problem to write following the traditional procedures of topic ---→ discussion ---→ writing. They are quite often lost for ideas. Basing writing on reading, gives students a substantial backdrop on which they can build their story or essay. There is content on the one hand : and cohesion, coherence rhetorical organization and conventions of written language on the other (Lopes 1991, Hanner – Stanchinna, 1985).
- Reading is food for the mind, reading to know something new, fascinating or even something as common as love can be stimulating. Often it can provoke one into thinking, responding silently to someone “talking silently.” It can be therapeutic for the restless or tired mind.
- This HLLP compensates for the lack of ordinary exposure to the language. Pillai (1991) states that “The second Language Learner” handicapped by a limited knowledge of the language and by lack of opportunities for using what he knows of the target language, seldom

makes much progress unless he has sought enrichment of his linguistic skills through an extensive reading program. And recent research by Gradman and Hanania (1991) demonstrates that “the extent of active exposure to language through individual outside reading” emerged as foremost among significant background factors that contributes to success in language learning.

- It introduces students to structuring and organization in academic reading and writing and it provides a starting point for summary writing skills (Frank 1990 ) and (Tilaka 1989).

## **Students’ Choice**

What do the students read? Students can choose any article from almost any source. There are however, certain guidelines as listed below:

1. Read what they like to read
2. The length of the selection could be :
  - 2 to 6 pages of the Reader’s Digest
  - 1 to 3 pages of a news magazine
  - ¼ page of the New Straits Times
  - ½ page of the Star or The Malay Mail

## **Sources**

- Reader’s Digest
- Newspapers
- News Magazines
- Academic Journals
- Other popular magazine on sports, environment, health, fashion, etc
- Internet

## **Topics Students Can Focus On:**

- Current Affairs  
Human Cloning  
Environment  
New Discoveries / Inventions  
Aids  
Terrorism  
Genetics

- Technology Transfer
- Cure for Cancer
- Human Relationship
  - Love
  - Family
  - Marriage
  - Divorce
- Social / Moral Issues
  - Religion
  - Society
  - Abortion
  - Law
- Economic Issues
  - Unemployment
  - Business
  - Inflation
  - Foreign Investment
  - Credit Card
  - Foreign Labor
- World Affairs
  - Afghanistan
  - The Middle East
  - Iraq
  - North Korea
- Story
  - Drama in Real Life
  - Miracle Recoveries
  - Unusual Happenings

## **Readability Levels**

Students can be guided to discover their own readability levels, some, after one or two false starts. The teacher should comment on the suitability of the language level of the article. Here, I am not suggesting using any instrument of formal readability measure, but rather the students going by their “psychological” and “affective” feel and help from the teacher. Simply how much of the article does a student understand? There must be comprehensible input (Krashen 1982) and (Long 1983). Though Krashen and Long specially refer to comprehensible input in

terms of discourse and interaction, they do present a strong case for comprehensible input in SLA. If reading aids in SLA it must provide comprehensible input. For this HLLP purpose, the student must understand the article as a whole in order to express the main idea in a simple statement and understand most of the important points the writer uses to develop the main idea.

### **Appropriate/Effective Level**

1. The student should understand about 70% of the article.
2. The student may not understand certain aspects or points but has grasped the main idea and most of the specific details.
3. About 30% of the article must be the challenging part that will stretch the student's mind to make the reading effective.
4. It is not essential that the student understand all of the words or expressions. There may be a hundred words that he/she does not know but that will not prevent him/her from understanding the article as a whole and enjoying it.

### **Inappropriate / Ineffective Level**

1. Unable to state the main idea correctly as a result of not understanding the article as a whole
2. Too many difficult words and expressions
3. Style or type of language used may be too academic: containing specific register or jargon
4. Reading is basically difficult – impeding understanding of essential aspects of reading

### **What Do the Students Do?**

There are six HLLP assignment sections: A, B, C, D, E & F on the Holistic reading Format (HRF) as shown on the following page.

**THE HOLISTIC READING FORMAT**

(HRF/Tilaka:1993 Ver.3)

**A. STUDENT DATA**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Assgn. No. \_\_\_\_\_  
English Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Semester \_\_\_\_\_ Due Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Course: \_\_\_\_\_ Part: \_\_\_\_\_ Lang. Instructor \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**B. BIBLIODATA**

Title: \_\_\_\_\_  
Author: \_\_\_\_\_ Source: \_\_\_\_\_  
Publisher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**C. UNDERSTANDING THE ARTICLE**

Remarks

1. Main Idea:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Major Points and Supporting Details

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Conclusion

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Meaning In Context

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**D. GRAMMAR POINT**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**E. RESPONSE/COMMENT**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

F. INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENTS

Performance \_\_\_\_\_  
(Scale 1-10)

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

—————END of FORMAT—————

Section D, “Grammar Point,” can be delayed for 2 or 3 weeks if the students have not been prepared for grammar tasks. The grammatical part of the HLLP is assigned to the student only after each aspect is introduced and discussed in class. For example, for HLLP week 3 below, the task on “Time – Meaning – Tense” is assigned after all the 12 basic “tenses” are introduced holistically (Tilaka 1991)

In addition to the explanations and instructions given, the HRF acts as a guide as to what the student is expected to do.

And this is what the student does:

- Selects and article
- Photocopies it or cuts it out
- Reads it to perform tasks under Sections C-E on the HRF.
- Fills out Section A – Student Data
- Fills out Section B – Bibliodata
- Writes out the main Idea – Section C1
- Figures out the Specific Details – section C2
- States the Conclusion- Section C3
- Selects about 5 words or phrases and explains their meaning in context
- Writes an opinion in responding to the ideas in the article.
- Does an oral presentation of the assignment and could attempt a Q/A Session.
- Uses presentation to stimulate critical thinking.

### **Reading for Grammar**

- Reads the article again for “Grammar” – consciously paying attention to particular grammatical features
- Focuses on particular grammatical items; a different item each week. The grammatical collocations based on readings of Celcia – Murcia and Diane – Larsen Freeman (1983: 49 – 56), Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Starvtvik (1985: 402 – 474) and Benson,

Benson and Ilson (1986) While others are seen as traditional grammatical relationships such as “subject – verb agreement” and “time – meaning – tense” and verb forms.

The following is a suggested schedule for “Grammatical Consciousness Raising” under section D of the HRF “Grammar Point”

*Week 1* – HLL 1 : Introduction to HLL

*Week 2* – HLL 2 : Grammatical Collocations

To understand how grammatical collocations function in discourse. The student attempts to identify for example,

Adjectives Collocations - (ART + ADJ + N)

Adverb Collocations - (ADV + V)

- (V + ADV)

- (ADV + ADJ + N)

Preposition Collocations - (PREP + ART + N)

- (V + PREP)

- (ADJ + PREP)

Infinitive Collocations - (to+Vb)

*Week 3* – HLL 3 : Time – Meaning – Tenses Relationship

The student’s task is to identify different verb tenses in the discourse to try and understand how the writer uses different verb sequences or shifts from one time reference to another to refer to events or states of being.

*Week 4* – HLL 4 : Subject - Verb Relationships

Singular Subject ---→ Singular Verb

Plural Subject ---→ Plural Verb

*Week 5* - HLL 5 : Repeat grammar topics of week 3 & 4

*Week 6* – HLL 6 : Subject – Pronoun Relationships

Singular Subject ---→ Singular Pronoun

Plural Subject ---→ Plural Pronoun

Masculine Subject ---→ Masculine Pronoun

Feminine Subject ---→ Feminine Pronoun

*Week 7* – HLL 7 : Modals & Modal Verb Sequences

*Week 8* – HLL 8 : Passive Verb Forms

*Week 9* – HLL 9 : Review of all forms of :

Time – Meaning – Tenses Relationships

Subject – Verb Relationships

*Week 10 – HLL 10 : Recognizing Clauses*

*Week 11 – HLL 11 : Reported Speech*

*Week 12 – HLL 12 : Discourse Markers / Linkers*

**Role of Teacher:**

- Explains the Holistic Language Learning Program at the first meeting of class  
Makes clear roles of student and teacher. The teacher's role is basically that of facilitator.
- Introduces and explains grammar points as laid out in the syllabus and also when problems arise especially in writing.
- Checks the HLLP assignments weekly i.e, indicates errors : does not correct them. Initiates awareness and correction through explanation and a correction code.
- Writes comments on student performance in the "Instructor's Comments" section. The teacher can comment on student's work or more importantly on the selection of the article. She should respond to the writer's point of view.
- Reports to class on good or interesting assignments and uses words of praise and encouragement when returning the evaluated HLL assignments.

**Conclusion**

This Holistic Reading Program is an excellent way of encouraging and making sure that students read – at least 12 articles over a semester. On the average it was found that about 5% of the students turned in excellent products, about 20% very good products, 30% good products, 25% fairly good products, and 20% poor products. For the majority, this is the only "extra-class" reading they would do. Students do not realize that so much information or knowledge is within reach so easily until they start reading on a regular basis. They practically "got the whole world in their hand," if they know where to lay them. They need a little help along the way. And I believe the teacher can give this help.

Through this program students learn to read for three distinct purposes. The first one is information. They get practice in understanding the main idea or argument the writer is presenting. In addition they learn to extract important details leaving out insignificant points.

The second purpose is reading for grammar, that is, reading at the “Grammar-Consciousness level.” When a student does this, he/she focuses on the underlying grammatical features of the language. For example, at one time he/she will only be “parsing” for subject-verb relationships; his/her mind is so tuned that it does not see any other aspect of grammar. At another time he/she can switch to only “parse” for what he/she sees as passive verb forms, so that erroneous “parsing” of the passive form can lead to learning the difference between the passive verb form and the passive adjectival.

And the third purpose is to develop critical thinking. To think critically has always been important; it is imperative for citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Halpern 1996). They learn to respond to what the author says. For example, “I don’t think aborting is the right thing to do. A better option would be to give the baby up for adoption. Or, I strongly disagree with the writer’s conclusion, I think war is sometimes necessary to settle the problem because talk does not get us anywhere.”

Many of the students have found the HLLP extremely useful and beneficial. It has helped them to better understand to some extent how the English language works – that there are specific structures to express meaning. They reported not only understanding and learning grammar, but also gleaned a lot of new information: general and specific knowledge. Some had even begun to enjoy reading and doing the HLL assignment. It gave them a sense of direction in English Language Learning and a sense of satisfaction, and they realized that reading was an avenue to learning and new knowledge.

Over the 15 years, at Universiti Teknologi MARA, I have had a good number of students produce very good work; some excellent work in fact. You never know what your students are capable of until you challenge them with some really heavy – duty thinking tasks.

On the other hand, there are of course the bottom 20% or so, the “Ghandians,” I call them, the staunch believers in “passive resistance” who in that philosophical spirit “Resist English as a Second Language” (RESL). This group produces mediocre work or sub-standard work or sometimes no work at all. In any case the numbers in groups of this nature are small and there is no cause for concern because concerned, they are not. And so let them be. I am enthusiastic about reading and commenting on the HLL assignments of the interested and excellent performers, and sometimes you get engrossed in an extremely exciting article or story that you forget you are checking an assignment.

And the first thing you want to do next class is tell that particular student what an excellent selection it was and how you enjoyed reading it. And that's real pedagogic satisfaction.

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