# Glossing: An Invaluable Aid to Reading Comprehension

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**Abstract**

From the learner's perspective, the presence of lexically difficult items in a reading text is the chief factor that influences its readability and comprehension. The focus of this paper is on the sources of lexical difficulty that learners of English confront when reading a story, etc. in their prescribed textbook and how an accompanying glossary can ease understanding. Reading texts forms a staple part of Indian school and college teaching materials, and they almost always contain lexical items that are either unfamiliar or difficult. Based on the premise that lexical problems cannot be left to take care of themselves, the materials developer concerned deploys glossing as an editorial instrument to aid the process of comprehension.

**Keywords**: glossing, words, lexical items, reading comprehension, materials developer

**Introduction**

Preparing a glossary for a textbook remains an underestimated editorial task, even for seasoned materials developers. Glossing requires skill, care, precision, sensitivity to text, and contextual awareness.

Lexical, syntactic, organizational, conceptual, and text-type factors influence readability and comprehension. This paper will focus on sources of lexical difficulty that learners of English face when processing a reading text in their coursebook and how an accompanying glossary can ease understanding. In Indian school and college textbooks, readings from different print genres are the main tools for developing reading

comprehension. As often as not, a reading text contains lexical items that the materials developer concerned feels are difficult or unfamiliar and therefore likely to impede understanding. Based on the premise that teaching materials include a significant number of lexically uncontrolled reading texts, and that lexical problems cannot be left to take care of themselves, the materials writer deploys glossing as an instrument to aid the process of comprehension.

I will be using the terms *word* and *lexical item* interchangeably, although the latter term is more accurate. According to Nuttall & Alderson (2005), a lexical item "can be loosely defined as a word or group of words with a meaning that needs to be learnt as a unitary whole – that would, for example, need a separate entry in a dictionary" (p. 63). This definition is particularly important for materials developers. Some lexical items are multiword items. A phrasal verb or a multiword verb is a case in point. In addition, words that look identical represent more than one lexical item: the meanings of homonyms and homographs manifest themselves only in context.

It must also be emphasized that the textbook writer's decision to gloss lexical items in a text does not conflict with the important pedagogic principle that learners should be trained to infer meaning from context. However, if the context does not offer enough clues, inference is virtually impossible. Sometimes the meaning of a word may not be deducible because it is hampered by the presence of other unfamiliar words at too high a density. On the assumption then that there is an *inferential load*, that is, there are some words in a text whose meaning cannot easily be inferred from context, the materials writer steps in with a glossary.

**Background**

Let me first provide a background to the emergence of pedagogic lexicography and its influence on the use of glossing in reading materials.

Samuel Johnson's famous *Dictionary of the English Language* was published on April 15, 1755. As a pioneering lexicographer, he admits in the Preface that his biggest challenge was to find a way of explaining English words to fellow native speakers using a set of simple terms. That is, his job was to ensure that his definition was *simpler, more comprehensible than the word it is being used to define*. His attempt to compile a group of words to explain and clarify other words that were then current was a precursor

to the work of Michael West and Albert Sidney Hornby in the first half of the 20th century to identify a set of defining words that could be used by editors of Learner's dictionaries, language teachers, and materials writers.

Glossing a word in a textbook is often a challenging task because the definition should be in words that we assume the learner knows. Borrowing a ready-made definition from a dictionary does not always help. Taking the cue from Tickoo (2003, pp. 283-284), let me draw your attention to this point by referring to how five dictionaries define **cat**.

1. Samuel Johnson in A Dictionary of the English Language (1755) defined *cat* as "a domestic animal that catches mice, commonly reckoned by naturalists the lowest order of the leonine species".
2. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1999) says a *cat* is "a small domesticated carnivorous mammal with soft fur, a short snout, and retractile claws. It is widely kept as a pet or for catching mice, and many breeds have been developed".
3. The Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary (1987) replaces the definition with an explanation in a sentence, on the premise that it will lead to a clearer understanding of the word: "A cat is a small furry animal with a tail, whiskers, and sharp claws that kills smaller animals such as mice and birds".
4. The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2002) offers a similar definition: "(a cat is) an animal with soft fur, a long thin tail, and whiskers, that people keep as a pet or for catching mice. A young cat is called a kitten".
5. The Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2020) provides this definition of a *cat*: "a small animal with soft fur that people often keep as a pet. Cats catch and kill birds and mice".

Clearly, definitions 3, 4, and 5 are from pedagogic learner's dictionaries and therefore focus on what a learner of English will appreciate.

**Defining Vocabulary**

Glossing lexical items is evidently related to the notion of *Defining Vocabulary,* a restricted set of carefully chosen words used to write the explanations in dictionaries. The assumption is: if a user knows this set of words they will understand the definition of every word in the dictionary concerned. How is the Defining Vocabulary of a dictionary chosen? For example, the selection of the 3000 keywords comprising the 'Defining Vocabulary' in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* is based on three criteria: *frequency*, *range*, and *familiarity*. The words which occur most **frequently** in English are included, based on the information in the British National Corpus and the Oxford Corpus Collection. The use of this criterion is self-evident: the most frequent 2000 words in English comprise about 80 per cent of almost any English text. However,

frequency of occurrence alone is not sufficient for a word to become a keyword in the Oxford 3000 because it may be a high-frequency word only in a restricted area like scientific writing. The word must also feature across a *range* of different types of text, that is, it should be both frequent and used in a variety of contexts. In addition, the Defining Vocabulary includes words that are very *familiar* to most users even though they are not used frequently. Usefulness is the deciding factor. To quote OALD 9 (2015): "These include, for example, words for parts of the body, words used in travel, and words which are useful for explaining what you mean when you do not know the exact word for something." Incidentally, OALD 10 (2020) also refers to the notion of *relevance*: "Oxford 3000 includes words that learners of English are likely to meet in class and in their study texts, even if they occur less frequently in a general corpus".

These criteria for developing a defining vocabulary can be traced to the seminal work of Michael West. In propounding a reading-first approach, West (1962) highlighted three advantages: one, reading can be used in "difficult circumstances", that is, in large classes, with limited facilities and low learner motivation; two, good reading material will ensure the development of the reading skill; and three, once reading knowledge is acquired, its use yields high "surrender value". In applying his theory to the development of his New Method Readers and Supplementary Readers (1953), West used five notions: one, the need to match the "mental age of the reading material" with the "learner's chronological age" with regard to the content of a reading text; two, the importance of developing "minimum adequate vocabulary"; three, identifying a pre-defined ratio between new words and running words on a printed page – Howatt (2004, p. 280) calls this the "lexical distribution principle"—thereby ensuring that too many new words did not appear too closely together; four, the use of what Howatt (2004, p. 280) calls the "lexical selection principle", that is, simplifying vocabulary by replacing old-fashioned, literary words with common modern equivalents (like changing 'plight' to 'state', 'isle' to 'island', and 'ere' to 'before'); and five, the significance of "defining vocabulary". These notions formed the foundation of West's landmark contribution, the General Service List of 2000 words (1953).

Essentially, a glossary deploys a fundamental lexicographic principle: *explain the meaning of a word by defining it in simple terms.* That is, a gloss

should provide the explanation of the word concerned by using other words whose meanings are self-evident. Glossary-makers are guided by what Johnson says in the Preface to his *Dictionary of the English Language*:

> To explain, requires the use of terms less abstruse than that which is to be explained, and such terms cannot always be found; for as nothing can be proved but by supposing something intuitively known, and evident without proof, so nothing can be defined but by the use of words too plain to admit a definition. (1755: https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/preface/)

Did Johnson himself scrupulously follow this advice on plainness? Widdowson (1990, p. 8) spotted the definition of the word ***network*** in Johnson's dictionary: *Anything reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections*. As Widdowson remarks: *(Johnson) not only fails to solve the problem of making meanings plain to the public but actually makes that problem a good deal more complex*. Incidentally, OALD 10 (2020) defines '***network***' as *a complicated system of roads, lines, tubes, nerves, etc. that are connected to each other and operate together*.

The two definitions reveal a fundamental difference between Johnson's dictionary and Hornby's dictionary: while the former aimed to give native speakers truthful accounts of English words, the latter is intended to help foreign and second language learners make sense of English words.

Let me now address some key questions about glossing.

### 1. What is glossing?

According to John Simpson (the former chief editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*), bilingual glossing was first attempted by Anglo-Saxon teachers who thought fit to assist their pupils' understanding of the Bible by explaining Latin terms in English. They adopted an interlinear technique of writing the English equivalents of Latin words between the lines of their manuscript texts (2017).

The word **glossary** comes from Latin, meaning 'a collection of unfamiliar words'. In Greek, the word *gloss* meant 'an obscure word requiring explanation'. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), it was first used in this sense in 1548. For four hundred and fifty years and more, the essence of this meaning has been retained in authoritative

dictionaries. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) offers these definitions:

> **gloss** (verb): provide an explanation, interpretation, or paraphrase for (a text, word, etc.) **gloss** (noun): a translation or explanation of a word or phrase

We can therefore assume that in ELT, *glossing* is an instructional technique that materials writers use to help learners understand unfamiliar words or expressions or unfamiliar meanings of words occurring in a text.

## 2. How is glossing helpful to learners?

- It is a direct and economical way of helping them learn the meanings of words and expressions in context.
- The understanding itself is immediate since the gloss generally appears close to the word or expression in question.
- Glossing makes learners less dependent on the teacher when the meaning of an unfamiliar word or expression needs to be understood—they can work out the contextual meaning on their own by using the glossary.
- Since a glossary represents in microcosm what happens in a dictionary, it can genuinely incentivize learners to use the dictionary.
- Importantly, when the word that has been glossed is polysemous, the materials writer and the teacher can use it to build a vocabulary enrichment task.

**Note:** In the rest of the paper, I will selectively provide examples. The examples are taken from the textbooks I have edited and my training materials. The main features of glossing first appeared in the notes that the Department of Materials Production, CIEFL, Hyderabad prepared in the 1980s as part of a larger compilation of aspects of teaching materials.

## 3. Where can glosses occur?

- in the margin
  *Example*:
  "*How has this voyage changed you?*
  When we met the Prime Minister after our return, he quoted Neil Armstrong:

'I went as an astronaut and returned as a human being.'

This voyage has changed my life completely.

I was stubborn, fussy[18], and impatient –

and all those traits[19] have gone now! At home I would

be picky about food[20], but now…"

(Source: '*Around the world in 254 days*' in *New! Learning to Communicate CB 8*, p. 16, OUP, 2019)

> [18]***fussy***: too concerned about details, especially unimportant ones
> [19]***traits***: qualities in your character
> [20]***picky about food***: eating only particular food items

- at the beginning of the text/lesson

  (*aim*: to introduce words that are essential for the comprehension of the text)

  For example, in the Coursebooks of *CIEFL's English 400* (S. Chand & Co., 1996) unfamiliar words and words that might hamper comprehension of the reading texts are glossed and illustrated at the beginning of the texts concerned.

- within the text (in parenthesis)

  *Example*:

  'In less than two minutes, a *cataract* – clouding of the eye lens – is removed.

  (Source: 'Dr Murugappa Modi' in *New English Reader 4*, p. 165, AP, 1990)

- at the end of the reading text/passage (This is the usual practice.)
- at the end of the book in text sequence
- at the end of the book, cumulatively and in alphabetical order (as in *Language Through Literature*, OUP, 1967)
- at the end/bottom of the page – as footnotes

## 4. What can be included in a gloss?

a) the number of the line/paragraph in which the word occurs

  *Example*: [line **3**]

  - *bafflement*: puzzle; something that is very difficult to understand
  - *Scotland Yard*: the London police; headquarters of the Criminal Investigation Department

    (Source: 'Macavity: The Mystery Cat' in *Eternal Lines*, p. 42, CBSE, 1981)

b) the word being glossed is **highlighted** in the text

*Example:*

If mice could **roar**

And elephants **soar**

And trees grow up in the sky:

If tigers could **dine**

On biscuits and **wine**…

Glossary

*roar*: to make a very loud, deep sound, like a lion or a tiger

*soar*: to fly high in the air

(Source: 'If mice could roar' in *Advanced Pilak Reader, Class VI*, pp. 57-58, Tripura BSE, OUP, 2005)

c) the word, phrase, idiom, etc. being glossed (in the form in which it appears in the text or in its root form)

*Example*:

*Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's (and unto God what is God's)*:

A sentence from the Bible (Matthew 22:21) which means 'to fulfil one's duties to the Government (or the world) and to God equally well'.

(Source: 'The Verger' by Somerset Maugham in *Reading for Meaning*, p. 155, S. Chand & Co., 1987)

d) the pronunciation of the word, if necessary

*Examples*:

- *lieutenants*:/ luːˈtenənts / (American pron.)

    (here) supporters

  (Source: 'Standing up for yourself' in *Reading for Meaning*, p. 138, S. Chand & Co., 1987)

- *bugle*: (pron. 'byoogl') a brass musical instrument like a trumpet

  (Source: 'Tangerine the Wasp' in *New Broadway CB 8*, p. 155, OUP, 2014)

e) the grammatical category of the word, if necessary

*Examples*:

- *harbour*: (verb) hold in one's mind over a long period of time

  (Source: 'Vibishan's Counsel' in *Skyline CB 8*, p. 48, OUP, 2006)

- *learned*: (adjective) (*pron.* **learn-**id) having a great deal of learning or knowledge
  
  (Source: 'The Poor Tailor and the Rabbi' in *New Wave 6*, p. 21, OUP, 1999)

f) the meaning of the word – in its contextual sense

  *Examples*:

  - *despair:* (here) (verb) be impressed and humbled
    
    (Source: 'Ozymandias' in *New Broadway LR 7*, p. 89, OUP, 2018)
  - *(unless the British nation) retraces its steps:* (here) withdraws the salt tax
    
    (Source: 'A pinch of salt rocks an empire' in *Skyline 8*, p. 63, OUP, 2006)

g) sense of appropriateness

  *Examples*:

  - *spinster*: (old-fashioned, often disapproving) a woman who is not married, especially an older woman who is not likely to marry. This word should not now be used to mean simply a woman who is not married.
  - *bachelor*: a man who has never been married: *an eligible bachelor (= one that many people want to marry, especially because he is rich)*
    
    (Source: *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2020)

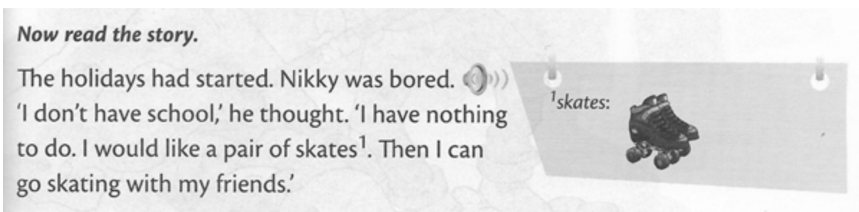h) an illustrative sentence or phrase, if necessary

  *Examples*:

  - *unequal laws*: laws whose interpretation depended on the parties concerned
    
    ('All are equal in the eyes of the law' is a modern idea, unknown to the ancient world.)
    
    (Source: 'Ulysses' in *Eternal Lines*, p. 19, CBSE, 1981)
  - *until you've seen my face a hundred times*: This way it would remain a secret forever because a peasant will not see the king so many times.
    
    (Source: 'A Hundred Faces' in *New Broadway CB 3*, p. 93, OUP, 2014)

## 5. In which language can glosses be provided?

- in the target language
- in the learner's first language/mother tongue
  (George (1979) recommended simple, brief glosses in the mother tongue.)
- in a language other than the target language and the learner's first language, which the learners know (as in English textbooks for tribal children)

**Note**: A gloss can be in the form of an illustration/diagram.



**Now read the story.**

The holidays had started. Nikky was bored. ◄))) 'I don't have school,' he thought. 'I have nothing to do. I would like a pair of skates[1]. Then I can go skating with my friends.'

[1]*skates:*

(Source: 'Nikki's Dream' in *New Broadway CB 2*, p. 69, OUP, 2018)

## 6. What can be glossed?

a) difficult/unfamiliar words, phrases, and expressions

*Examples*:

An escaped sixty-five pound baboon led pursuers on a three-hour slapstick chase through Friendship International Airport today but was caught when he ducked into a ladies' room.

Glossary

- *pound*: a unit for measuring weight (= 0.454 of a kg)
- *baboon*: a large African or Asian monkey with a long face like a dog's [+ a picture]
- *slapstick chase*: a funny chase ['slapstick' is a type of humour that is based on simple actions, e.g. people falling down.]
- *ducked into*: (here) moved into the ladies' room quickly, to avoid being caught
- *ladies' room*: a toilet/bathroom for women in a public building or place

(**Note**: The above text is an example of the challenge faced by a textbook writer when an authentic text (in this case, a news report) is included as a reading passage.)

b) concepts (unfamiliar information)

  *Examples*:

- *Archimedes Principle*: An object in a fluid is buoyed up by a force equal to the weight of the displaced fluid.

  (Source: 'Archimedes Principle' in *New Broadway CB 8*, p. 120, OUP, 2014)

- *Aryan-superiority theory*: belief that Germans, who were Aryans, were superior to all other peoples

  (Source: 'My Greatest Olympic Prize' in *Reading for Meaning*, p. 39, S. Chand & Co., 1987)

c) allusions (persons, events, etc.)

  *Examples*:

- *Pierre de Coubertin*: the Frenchman whose efforts were largely responsible for the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896

  (Source: 'My Greatest Olympic Prize' in *Reading for Meaning*, p. 42, S. Chand & Co., 1987)

d) foreign words

  *Examples*:

- Der Fuhrer: the German word for 'the leader' (This was Hitler's title.)

  (Source: 'My Greatest Olympic Prize' in *Reading for Meaning*, p. 39, S. Chand & Co., 1987)

e) idioms and proverbs

  *Examples*:

- *at the (white man's) beck and call*: always ready to obey (the white man's) orders

  (Source: 'Jamaican Fragment' in *New! Learning to Communicate CB 8*, p. 133, OUP, 2019)

- *beat a retreat*: move away quickly to avoid something unpleasant

  (Source: 'The Kumbh Mela' in *Skyline CB 8,* p. 148, OUP, 2006)

f) technical terms (specialist English registers)

  *Examples*:

- *physics of motion*: the scientific study of movement

  (Source: 'Galileo' in *Skyline CB 8,* p. 94, OUP, 2006)

- *prosecute*: (law) take legal action against a person
  (Source: 'The Breathalyser' in *Reading for Meaning*, p. 127, S. Chand & Co., 1987)

g) archaic, obsolete words and expressions

   *Examples*:

- *fain*: (old use) willingly or gladly
  (Source: 'A pinch of salt rocks the empire' in *Skyline CB 8*, p. 62, OUP, 2006)
- *yore*: (old use) time long past
  (Source: '*Santa Filomena*' in *Skyline CB 8*, p. 142, OUP, 2006)

h) slang, colloquialisms, and dialectal expressions

   *Examples*:

- *string oneself up*: (slang) kill oneself by hanging
- *peepers*: (slang) eyes
  (Source: 'On Saturday Afternoon' in *Spectrum*, pp. 123-124, OL, 1977)

i) abbreviations, acronyms, and contractions

   *Examples*:

- INS: (abbr.) Indian Navy Ship
- INSV: (abbr.) Indian Naval Sailing Vessel
  (Source: 'Around the world in 254 days' in *New! Learning to Communicate CB 8*, p. 12, OUP, 2019)
- derogatory and pejorative expressions
  *Example*:
- *vixen*: a female fox; (here) (offensive) an ill-tempered woman
  (Source: 'Sparrows' in *Spectrum*, p. 68, OL, 1977)

j) taboo words and vulgar terms

   *Examples*:

- *bogger*: (taboo) used as a swear word to insult somebody, especially a man, and to show anger or dislike
- *balls-up*: (taboo) something that has been done very badly; a mess
   (Source: 'On Saturday Afternoon' in *Spectrum*, p. 123, OL, 1977)

## Conclusion

Morgan (who was on the visiting faculty at the Central Institute of English in the late 1960s) taught a vacation course in Budapest in 1965 for secondary-school teachers of English, which included a demonstration class of forty pupils who had been learning English for less than two years. The lesson was based on an unsimplified extract from *Pickwick Papers*. Before the class began, he was rightly alarmed at the prospect of a disastrous lesson. But it turned out to be an unqualified success. What contributed to the success? In his own words:

> The essential reason, I am sure, is that *I did not teach it.* They did all the really important work on the text for themselves. Their book was furnished with copious and helpful glosses and notes on the reading passages. With the aid of this excellent apparatus they had sat at home and learned to read the text for themselves. (1967)

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