Choose Your Own Adventure: Mystery of the Maya

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The Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) graded reader series consists of 30 titles that have been rewritten for English as a Second Language (ESL) or Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The books have been written at three vocabulary levels to accommodate students with various levels of proficiency: 500 headwords, 700 headwords, and 900 headwords.

One book, Mystery of the Maya, was piloted as part of the ongoing graded reading component of a first-year compulsory reading and writing course for non-English majors. The students were first given the books to read independently as homework. While reading, the students were asked to take a memo of any new or forgotten words they encountered and to write down the story endings they experienced on a worksheet. A week later, the book was used as a part of classroom activities. To be specific, the students completed Activity Sheets which are freely downloadable from the companion website <mhe-cyoa.com>. Because of time constraints, only two of the four worksheets were used: Activity Sheet 1 (vocabulary) and Activity Sheet 2 (guided reading). The vocabulary worksheet consists of 10 multiple-choice questions and 5 word association questions. The guided reading worksheet leads the students on four adventures and has two comprehension questions for each adventure.

Generally speaking, the majority of the students had a favorable impression of Mystery of the Maya. In addition to my observations, the students were asked to rate their level of interest in the book and the difficulty of the book. All of the students indicated that they would like to read another book in the series.

In addition to being engaging, CYOA books stimulate critical thinking. For example, the reader is forced to make decisions, which have a direct influence on the outcome of the story. Concerning decision-making, some students commented about how thinking about the endings affected their decisions, “when I have to choose what to do next, I think carefully about what will happen”. Some of the students commented that the endings were “unique” and “unexpected”. Since Mystery of the Maya has 29 endings, some of the students commented that they were surprised by the variety of outcomes.
students commented that they will reread several more times to find more of the endings. One student commented, "I couldn't reach any good endings, but it was so fun" which certainly indicates that she was engaged and had read the book more than once.

Another major advantage of the CYOA format is that it ensures that the students will repeatedly encounter the same words. It has been suggested that a reader needs to encounter a word upwards of 30 times to learn it (Waring, 2012). Naturally, if a student rereads the story several times, they will see the same word many more times than a single reading. In addition to reading extensively, intensive reading activities such as a rereading are useful (See Grabe & Stoller, 2011). For this reason, the guided reading worksheets, which are available on the CYOA website, are a great classroom activity.

My only criticism concerns the companion website for students and teachers. Because reading-while-listening aids with vocabulary acquisition (Brown, Waring, & Donkaewbua, 2008), accompanying audio is a useful resource. However, in order to listen to the audio, the students must register for an account. After logging into the website, the student need to answer a copy protection-type question before they can listen to the accompanying audio. Although I can understand why the publisher would want to protect their recordings, this could be a source of frustration for students who are poor typists. In terms of negative comments, several students commented that the vocabulary was too difficult for them. One student wrote that it was "a bother" to turn to various pages in the book.

Despite the shortcomings of the companion website, I wholeheartedly recommend the books of the Choose Your Own Adventure series as class readers or as a unique addition to any university's library graded reader collection. I hope, and expect that many more of the original 185 CYOA books will be adapted for ESL and EFL readers.

References


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Choose Your Own Adventure: Mystery of the Maya, privacy, in the first approximation, is decided by a typical basic personality type.
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