

Voluntary Reading to Improve Students' Language Awareness

A case study geared to enhance undergraduate students language awareness and communicative competence through autonomous reading at the Faculty of Science and Arts-Khulais

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Abstract

This paper investigates the effect of reading simplified English literature books in improving undergraduate students language awareness, and enhancing their communicative competence. The College of Science and Arts in Khulais town, which is an affiliate of King Abdul Aziz University is launching a challenging program in to hoist the level of languages Arabic in General and English in particular. The practical end of the investigation is to provide information to policy makers, curriculum developers, educators, teachers and parents. Allowing students freedom of choice as to the type of simplified books they might opt for, the researcher seeks to note down the gradual change and improvement on the part of the students. This kind of reading is mainly done for pleasure, and hence reflects personal choice and strengthens the sense of independence. Therefore, its effect is expected to be greater compared with formal reading done in classroom settings under the direct supervision of the tutor.

Key words: simplified books, independent, freedom of choice, language awareness, communicative competence.

1.0 Introduction

Literature has been a subject of study in many countries at a secondary or tertiary level, however, it has not received its due attention in the EFL/ESL classrooms. But since the 80s EFL teachers have started to discover how vital it is for boosting the levels of English of their students. The researcher in the present paper sets out to consider the use of literature or to be exact “readers” at undergraduate levels and how it can be manipulated along the lines of secondary and tertiary schools with the necessary changes to fit in the undergraduate level.

To introduce the free use of literature books, a definition is needed to be provided as to what literature is. The Macmillan English Dictionary defines literature as stories, poems, and plays, especially those that are considered to have value as art and not just entertainment. Value and entertainment are two key words in the present research as through entertainment students are encouraged to go on reading more texts, and assess the value of that literary work. The direct outcome of that process is an ongoing improvement on the part of the students as they start to develop conceptually and linguistically. Conceptually, through reading literary texts students shall be exposed to diverse communities with differing cultures, history and social life. Undoubtedly, students could have access to such kind of learning from social studies and the relevant manuscripts, that give a deeper understanding of the cultural values of that community (Flowers, P., and M. C. Roos. 1994), however in literary texts information is presented in a much more creative and motivating fashion. In many studies there are several good reasons proposed by teachers, educators and linguists for using literature to develop communicative and conceptual aspects. Some of these reasons have been cited here by way of exemplification, foremost of which are the following:

- Literature is an authentic material where hardly the text is hardly modified. However, the kind of books our students were availed of had been subjected to a long process of simplification by native speakers. Nevertheless, their linguistic and aesthetic value is highly preserved. opted for simplified versions have been opted for largely because they have been felt to encourage students into reading as many books as they can. Original works would call for turning to dictionaries so frequently and hinder the process of reading and hence the reading becomes tedious and uninteresting and loses much of the pleasure it ought to give.

- Literature encourages communication amongst peers when discussing how beautiful and interesting the themes they have been exposed to. Young people are, by nature, known for their passionate enthusiasm to discussing things particularly football. So by drawing on this inherent quality, we expect them to discuss animatedly some of the books they have handled. Literary texts are often intensively rich meaning, and can be effectively explored for discussions and sharing feelings or opinions.
- Quoting (Thorndike 1973) Literature broadens language awareness and consequently communicative competence. This is only realizable when the tutor assumes the role of an eavesdropper or an overseer in such kind of autonomous reading by asking students to investigate a highly sophisticated or non standard examples of language (which can occur in literary texts) which further sharpen their insights into becoming more aware of the norms of language use. This stylistic aspect of literary texts shall develop their aesthetic and artistic abilities to appreciate creative writing.
- Literature has a remarkable instructive value for the whole person. Learners are expected to develop attitudes and opinions as to rival those qualities expressed in the texts or adopt them. The values and merits to be laden in literary texts are part of a hidden curriculum that belongs to the world outside the classroom setting.
- One of the inherent values of literature as compared with other forms of creative writing is that it motivates. It assumes a central position in any culture or community. Therefore, upon reading a literary work students will have the a sense of achievement due to the change they have experienced in their viewpoints to lots of things. They have done much reading in their course -books, however, the pleasure they have drawn from such kind of sophisticated reading is immensely different from what they have experienced in their classroom-monitored reading. It follows from that, what they come up with when exploring literary texts outside the environment of the classroom setting is bound to be sustainable and much more productive.

2.0 Theoretical framework

This part is part is intended to give special considerations by means of adopting a frame of reference to shed light on why today there is such a wide interest in the topic of learner independence, learner autonomy, learning strategies, self-directed learning and individualization. This trend has come about mainly in the period of the 90s and gained momentum only recently after Discourse Analysis has been exhaustively taped. So, a renewed interest in the area started to appear and be pushed to university level, after the ailment inflicting the teaching and learning of languages at the general education institution started to show their appearance at university level. What makes learner independence as challenging and stimulating that it pops to the surface again? Let us consider briefly the previous developments that led to the communicative theory or approach which gave rise to the question of learner autonomy.

In early seventies there appeared what was called explicit learner-centered approaches. One of their salient features was the practice of needs analysis which triggered off in its own right language teaching for special purposes. This has further led redefining of learning objective in linguistic and sociocultural terms of specific groups of learners. This stage, which gave rise to the communicative approach, and has in turn led to the definition of language content, “what “ to teach and then followed by a redefinition of the methodology itself- materials and techniques- that is “how” to teach. Hence, these early communicative approaches have centered on the learner, as the described the product of the learner’s performance and the teacher’s methodology which help develop the desired type of competence (Trim and Brumfit,1991).

Linguistics has always benefited the fruits of the neighboring disciplines. In the 70s and the 80s cognitive psychology has witnessed striking developments, and was enriching this area with substantial body of theories and research, with the effect that we are better able to achieve a methodical knowledge in the nature of learning process and learning conditions. Cognitive sciences have had such a considerable impact on the communicative approaches, in that the procedures through which a learner acquires a linguistic as well as a communicative competence have gained a fresh importance and have become more or less as important as the teacher’s methodology,(Corno-Prozzo,1991). Development of cognitive sciences has further led to a breakthrough in studies in individual differences. Knowledge provided by this development helped us gain insight into types of learners that they do exist: researchers now talk about analytic and intuitive learners, rule-builders, and data gatherers, visually-oriented learners and verbally-oriented learners.

This led flourishing of research movement that new considerations started to appear in connection with such areas as teaching materials, teaching styles, constraints and rewards, success and failure in hindering or promoting motivation. Before this only two types of motivation has claimed the interest of researchers, namely instrumental and integrative motivation. Another breakthrough in the field of interlanguage production which is in close link with this development is what is called good language learner research, has proved that different learners use a variety of ways or effective strategies, and that “good” learners are capable of applying richer and more flexible range of strategies. This raised a number of very interesting questions in link with strategies. Some of these questions: Can strategies be learnt? Can they be taught? Are learners “good” because they use strategies, or rather, do they use strategies because they possess good processing skills? (Weden-Rubin,1987).

What do all these factors have in common? Is there a common factor unifying all these trends apart from the communicative approach to language learning? Undoubtedly, they are so closely concerned with learning, what the learner does or can do and that teaching is chiefly concerned with the provision of good opportunities and conditions for attaining more productive learning .

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Sustained-silent reading (SSR)

Drawing on the researcher’s experience as an old practitioner, who taught at different levels of education including teacher training institutes, the researcher at intermediate schools used to keep a large ledger , with a separate page for every students. The page, was being divided into three columns showing the student’s name, the number and titles of books he/she read and how well they are progressing. This kind of reading is generally called Sustained Silent Reading, SSR for short. There is one class per week which was wholly dedicated to autonomous reading. There was a big school library. Pupils would be asked to leave the classroom and go there, partly to change the setting, and books were neatly arranged. There are no books reports, nor assignments or exams and grades. All that can act as a nightmare was discarded. Students aren’t forced to finish their choices if they wished to select a different book. They are at full liberty to chose whatever they might want to read. These session have helped our students develop richer vocabularies, understand complex oral and written structures and become good writers and proficient spellers. Therefore, pupils are shifted to higher levels of literacy. I still keep my yesterday’s ledger on me. It is not an exaggeration in the strict sense of the word, but the standard of my intermediate school pupils is far better than that of my university students. Were they to be seated for an assessment test, they would be sure outperform our university students.

In one rural setting the school was built in close vicinity to the Nile in what used to look like a wood. You reach the school by the passageway through the wood. Pupils were encouraged to borrow books at the end of the school day. It was a boarding school. After having dinner and took a siesta, they would take their books and go into the forest. I used to disguise as a shepherd and keep wandering among them while they were reading. I sometimes ask one of them why they read after school in a funny and simple way. Some would shun from answering my question, yet there are those who would gladly tell me at the top of their voices, Tom Brown’s Schooldays. I would pretend to repeat what they said in a very awkward manner to the effect that they would all burst out laughing, believing me to be a shepherd. According to both teachers and pupils voluntary reading is a much more pleasant approach than regular skill-building instruction. Yesterday’s unkempt hair pupils are today’s prominent ministers and statesmen. Today the old ledger is still there when I read a name the image pops up.

However, at the secondary level students have grown a bit unwilling to carry out instructions, and they hardly read except those whose parents have received high formal education and they know the value of education. Secondary schools were mainly constructed at urban settings. It would seem that urban life has carried students off the academic track. Students were absorbed in the delicacies and delights of the town and were left with very little time for reading.

Now, I have to unearth my old tools , that is my old method of teaching voluntary reading but with fundamental changes to fit in the realm of the university sphere . At university level the teaching of literature is viewed as a cultural product, in which the basic aim is to have your students become informed about the target culture. In the present study this is not one of the ultimate aims. It is the linguistic value that matters most, and which the researcher seeks to establish as a kind of achievement. It is true that students are required to report on the social, political and historical values expressed in the text and without a deep thinking over what they have read, this objective would be unattainable.

Students are encouraged to utilize the language of the text as used by the author to report their impressions and opinions. So, their learning becomes greatly learner-centered. In fact students are not taught literature in the strict sense of the word. They are asked to choose from a wide range of literature books the ones that appeal to their sentiments and then to write a literary synopsis. It is this autonomous choice which is emphasized here in the present study. As learners proceed with reading the literary text, they are likely to pay attention to how language is used. Consequently, they come to grips with the different meanings interspersed in the text and therefore this process involuntarily seep down their cognitive powers with the effect of increasing their general awareness of the English language.

Though the tutor chooses to watch the whole course of action from a distance, he has to interfere every now and then to draw the students attention to how grammar and vocabulary are used. This is only possible of course when the tutor has done a substantial reading of the literature books put at the students' disposal. At the English department, the teaching staff had a break and started reading as many of these books. Most tutors have already had come across some of these books during their old school days. Science fiction stories have constituted a greater portion of the student's choice at the expense of the other genres. Very few students have opted for classics such as *Treasure Island*, *Jane Eyre*, etc.

In the present study, a close attention has been paid to stylistic analysis. In stylistic analysis, linguistic features are strictly studied in order to help improve students' reading competence or ability, furthermore enable them to interpret the meaning of the text perfectly well, and develop a sense of art appreciation, as a by-product. A further process-based model, which is generated by virtue of independent reading, and which falls in the scope of this study, is a personal growth model. This model is crucial in that it encourages the learners to use the language they have learned to talk about their own personal experience. Thus, the ball is thrown at their court, the whole thing has come to the very reality and home of the student. It is this kind of interaction between the learner and the text that helps make the language more memorable. When asked to reflect on their own experiences, some students have managed to use the language of the texts they have learnt quite adequately. To further make this process unforgettable students were asked to translate into Arabic a chapter or two from any of the books they have read, after they were instructed to read the part they wish to translate in advance and put the books away. Their production reflected a surprisingly good grasp of the grammar and the lexical items.

3.1.1 Practical framework

To follow strictly the rules of voluntary reading as it was established above, the researcher thought of a motivating factor to urge the students read and report their impression. The administration of the College to guarantee the success of the program, proposed 'The Reward of the Best Report', whoever submits a good report shall be sent off to spend a month in an English speaking country. Before start reading the text they have chosen, students were reminded of the reward. More reading hours have allocated to help extend the phase of voluntary reading. Students were also told that whoever write a literary synopsis on more than ten books shall be rewarded financially.

To put things into practice, I have adopted Tim Bowen and Jonathan Marks, in their book *Inside Teaching*, recommend the following ideas for extensive reading of literature.

- Hold brief classroom discussions on what learners have been reading (progress reports).
- Ask learners to describe a book they like in such a way to make others want to read it.
- Select a short novel which has been recently made into a film or TV series with which your learners are familiar.
- Almost all of the English novels have been made into movies. So students are weekly given a session to watch one of the novel or texts available in the library which has been made into a movie. We have noticed that though some parts of the novel was cut or the whole work, sometimes may undergo drastic change for the purpose of the movie, the process of watching has considerably boosted the students' understanding of the text.

The structure of the text students read, whether simple, straightforward or difficult can actually affect their ability and desire. If it is an interesting text that easily reads because well organized and coherent, with logical flow of meanings and contain all the information students set about to gather, it can then be described as a friendly text and student are likely to go on reading it without abandoning their seat before finishing it. Some American educators argued of their experience of some American course-books as difficult to read, “

Unfortunately, the quality of writing used in some content-area textbooks found in American classrooms is considered deficient in some respects". (Anderson and Armbruster 1984; Armbruster and Gudbrandsen 1984; Flood et al. 1991). Some textbooks are simply "baskets of facts," little more than loosely connected lists of propositions about a topic. The organization of chapters, the structure of expository text, and the language may be murky. Traditional expository structures such as cause-effect, temporal sequence, or comparison-contrast are seldom found. Students often find more clearly written expository text in good informational trade books than in textbooks (Freeman and Person 1992).

In addition we have prepared a long list of questions and entries which are meant to help them fill a good report on the text. Students are free to adopt the list or decline it. They are also free not submit reports or make any kind of written literary criticism.

3.1.1 Voluntary reading

Voluntary reading is the reading students choose to do on their own without being asked to, which reflects the reader's personal choice of the text to be read, not to mention the time and place. It is done for information or pleasure. Tutors never interfere to assign the text to be read nor they ask students to submit reports on what they have read. This kind of reading has multiple names. It is called independent reading (Krashen,1993;Short 1995;Morrow 1991), leisure reading (Greaney 1980), spare time reading (Searls 1985), recreational reading (Manzo and Manzo 1995), and reading outside of school (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988).

Research indicates, however, that many students are not well disposed to reading if ever, in great quantities. Presently, a number of scholars from varied disciplines have set out to investigate the amount of time students allocate to reading and the effect of literacy on cognitive functions. In a series of studies involving hundreds of students, Morrow and Weinstein (1986) found that very few preschool and primary grade children chose to look at books during free-choice time at school. Greaney (1980) found that fifth-grade students spent only 5.4 percent of their out-of-school free time engaged in reading, and 23 percent of them chose not to read at all. Anderson, Fielding, and Wilson (1988) found that students spend less than 2 percent of their free time reading. Furthermore, as students get older, the amount of reading they do decreases.

Teachers and educators who are involved in language arts, who have become acquainted with the value of independent reading through their long career at school settings, help their students get absorbed in real literature the moment they have developed the potential to reading. They have given special attention to the issue of silent reading in class rooms believing it to be the first step preceding reading per se. According to Anderson, Fielding, and Wilson (1988), "students who begin reading a book in school are more likely to continue to read outside of school than students who do not begin a book in school". However, there are teachers who is knowledge of Children's literature is very scanty. Their limitation is reflected upon the their students' attainment in this area. So, such kind of teachers can safely be assumed that they ignore the very effects of their teaching methods on students' attitude toward reading, (Short and Pierce 1990).

Generally speaking, People read to live life in the true sense of the word, to earn a living, to come to grips with what is going on in the world, and avail themselves of the accumulated knowledge of civilization, and be acquainted with the world legacy. Reading also has the effect of widening their scope of knowledge and improve their understanding of the world. Well-versed people are better placed to live a very successful life and to perfect any kind of mission or task assigned to them, moreover, even the benefits of democracy and the capacity to govern ourselves successfully depend on reading. In this respect, it would look be appropriate to quote Jefferson to substantiate the preceding point linked with democracy .Thomas Jefferson believed that informed citizens are the best safeguard against tyranny. He believed that every citizen must know how to read, that it is the public's responsibility to support the teaching of reading, and that children should be taught to read during the earliest years of schooling. In a letter to Colonel Edward Carrington, Jefferson wrote (1787) ""The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

There are several learning merits and achievements which are only attained pursuing a clear-cut plan of independent reading. In that, it builds and enhances through course of time students' background knowledge, which is desirable for the knowledge of the world. It contributes to the knowledge of the text content and familiarity with standard text structures.

Independent reading has a very noticeable impact on vocabularies. Students who follow a certain plan of independent reading are most likely to develop richer vocabularies than their peers who do little or no reading. Therefore, we can safely assume that readers with a rich vocabulary have the ability to understand content and appreciate the language used in well-written texts. A synthesis of existing reports suggests that students in grades 3–12 learn about 3,000 new words a year (Nagy, Anderson, and Herman 1987). Some students enjoy such a retentive memory that they acquire knowledge of some vocabulary words and memorize them as the result of direct good instruction. However, that could only account for a modest proportion of the total. To learn 3,000 words a year would require learning about fifteen words every school day—more than even the most enthusiastic teacher would attempt to teach. Vocabulary is learned from reading (Anderson et al. 1984; Nagy, Anderson, and Herman 1987; Read 1986; Read and Hodges 1982; Rice, Meyer, and Miller 1988).

To sum up this part, research supports the fact that during primary and elementary grades, even a small amount of independent reading helps increase students' reading comprehension, vocabulary growth, spelling facility, understanding of grammar, and knowledge of the world.

In intermediate and secondary schools as it has been mentioned somewhere in this paper, this type of voluntary reading where it was performed under the direct observation of the teacher is called SSR (sustained silent reading). As adults, most people practice this kind of reading. Some people and educators believe that this kind of reading can only serve as a tool of pleasure or entertainment, particularly parents as it has very little language value that can be measured by means of standardized texts. In fact, research done on this type of reading has so strongly shown that it constitutes the basics of our good knowledge of the language, vocabulary and spelling and our ability in understanding complicated phrases and producing consistent language structures.

3.0 Literature review

Independent or voluntary reading is not a new approach to literature. It was practiced as early as the 1980s when teachers at intermediate and tertiary schools have recognized the value of including the teaching of literature in EFL/ESL classroom settings to serve the very same end provided by course-books or supplement language items as vocabulary and grammar. This kind of approach was largely adopted by intermediate school and secondary school teachers of general education. However, at university level the situation was radically different. The astonishingly deteriorating standards of English language at university level, made the researcher think of considering the possibility of introducing SSR at university level, to help alleviate the deplorably falling standards of English amongst university students at the College of Science and Arts, in Khulais, Saudi Arabia. As far as the researcher knows, no one particular university is currently opting for voluntary reading. May be it is introduced somewhere by those veteran teachers who have one day taught at the intermediate and secondary levels of general education, and have crept into universities as their experience is greatly sought at universities. However, interesting research has been done at intermediate and tertiary school in many countries of the world.

A remarkable study was conducted by Daniel Fader and Elton McNeil's *Hooked on Books: Program & Proof* (Putnam, 1966), deserves to be included in this paper. Fader, a former professor of English language and literature at the University of Michigan, and his colleague, McNeil, encouraged adolescent boys in reform school to read newspapers, magazines, and paperback books and to talk about their readings in class. After one year, the researchers discovered the boys' reading comprehension scores on the Scholastic Achievement Test had increased by more than an entire grade level, or twice as much as the scores of those students who didn't read for pleasure. How hooked on books were these recreational readers? Fader saw some of them reading in the bleachers at basketball games, instead of keeping their eyes on the action!

Another equally significant study was conducted by Warwick Elley and Francis Mangubhai, which showed that free voluntary reading has a powerful effect on second-language learners. Elley, of the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, and Mangubhai, of the University of the South Pacific, studied fourth- and fifth-grade Fiji Island students who were learning English, with daily classes of 30 minutes. The students were divided into three groups: the first was taught with traditional methods that emphasized drill, repetition, and grammar; the second engaged in free reading for the entire half-hour period; and the third group participated in what we call "big books"—a method in which the teacher reads an enlarged version of a good book to the class several times and then students discuss, draw, enact, and read the story together, before eventually writing their own versions of the tale. After two years, the free-reading and shared-reading groups were far superior to the traditional group on tests of reading comprehension, writing, and grammar.

It is pretty clear that all these studies were carried out at primary or tertiary schools. A good insight can, nevertheless, be drawn from these studies by redefining the learner's needs at the undergraduate level. The techniques and procedures applied to the population of these studies have to be changed to fit at university level. What the researcher seeks to do in the present research, is to gear the techniques of voluntary reading used at lower levels of education in such a way that they can be applied at university level.

4.0 Conclusion

The College administration has willingly provided all the required facilities and services to ensure the success of this program after they have realized that something has to be done on national level to boost the standards of languages in college with special attention to English language which is undeniably the language of science and technology. It is almost one month since this program has been launched. The program has no deadline and that tutors are required to submit brief weekly and lengthy monthly reports on the progress of the students. Attracted by the prospect of a financial and a tour reward many students stood up to face the challenge. Industrious ones have already read a number of books as many as five, while a few students submitted reports of what they have read. To help make this program a success, the administration of the College has drummed up the important resources. Readers (literature books) have been ordered from abroad, varied and simplified. Movies, on those books have also been supplied as they are needed to be used as a kind of brainstorming step before the students start reading the text. It was noticed that movies have the effect of enhancing students understanding of the texts. Two big lobbies with good ventilation and illumination have been transformed into reading rooms, with mobile shelves stuffed with books. The College schedule has been modified to allow for more reading hours. Each class was given two reading hours per week. Students were allowed to borrow books, and keep them as long as they can. Students can buy electronic dictionaries at a fair price. Tutors, were asked to do everything they can to help their students.

The first week has witnessed a remarkable turn out of students reading books and making synopsis . However the number started to dwindle. Something must be done to restore the spirit of reading. The first financial reward has been declared and has actually acted as a booster shot. Students again rushed to the library and began borrowing books. A reward of a new kind was announced . Any student who will read a book and make a presentation shall be rewarded on the spot. This last one has had a very significant effect, that students are seen carrying readers during breaks and trying to prepare for presentations. The amount of free reading done outside of university at home, has consistently been found to relate to achievement in vocabulary, reading comprehension, verbal fluency, and general information. Students' reading achievement correlates with success in university and the amount of independent reading they do, though not amongst even third of the students, it is considered a good kick off. (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988; Guthrie and Greaney 1991; Krashen 1993; Cunningham and Stanovich 1991; Stanovich and Cunningham 1993). If this process has been maintained while varying the quality and quantity of the rewards, we can safely claim that the program is sure to bid success. Accordingly, the habit of voluntary reading can be inculcated in the long run.

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