

The Practice of Extensive Reading to Enhance the Learners' Reading Skill

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Abstract

Nowadays, many teachers at universities are used to distinguish in their English Foreign Language (E.F.L) classrooms between two categories of learners. There are, indeed, certain students, who do not read or simply do not enjoy reading while others have a real appetite for books. The former learners are perhaps not motivated to read outside the classroom, do not understand what they read or are fearful to read a material, which is beyond their reading capabilities. These weak readers tend also to see reading as a serious difficult process requiring hard work and great efforts, so that their reading rate does not develop and they remain weak readers. This, in fact, is a real problem. Thus, what sort of help can teachers give to these inexperienced or reluctant readers?

This paper, however, focuses on the practice of extensive reading as an effective technique to help the learners reach the mastery of the reading skill and overcome their difficulties. It tends also to discuss key questions such as: What does extensive reading mean? How can extensive reading contribute to the development of learners' reading abilities?...etc

Key Words: Reading Skill, Extensive Reading, E.F.L classrooms

Introduction

Reading is an activity with a purpose. In fact, a person may read in order to gain information, to learn new vocabulary or to gain a general idea of the writers' point of view and their written style. A person may also read for enjoyment, to enhance knowledge of the language being read. As stated by Alderson, J.C (2000: 28):

...enjoyable, intense, private activity, from which much pleasure can be derived and in which one can become totally absorbed. Reading means different things to different people, for some it is recognizing written words, while for others it is an opportunity to teach pronunciation and practice speaking, however reading always has a purpose. It is something that we do every day. It is an essential part of our daily lives, taken very much granted and generally assumed to do something that everyone can do.

Reading texts also gives readers opportunities to study language, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and the way sentences, paragraphs and texts are constructed. However, every teacher is surely aware that for many foreign language students, the ability to engage in fluent reading and to read both for important information and for pleasure is the most valuable benefit they will gain from language study. Thus, he/she has a role to play in assisting students with low reading abilities by introducing extensive reading in order to enhance the learners' reading habit and to give them a thirst for reading that will stay with them throughout their lives.

As stated by Eskey "Reading ...must be developed and can only be developed by means of extensive and continual practice"(Eskey 1986:33). Nuttall also pointed out that: "the best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it" (Nuttall 1982:168). Thus, it becomes clear that extensive reading is advocated by educators in order

to promote reading and to facilitate learners' foreign language acquisition.

What does Extensive Reading mean?

Extensive reading is an approach to the teaching and learning of a foreign language reading. It is appropriate at all stages of foreign learning for it is never too early or too late to learn to read a foreign language. For Palmer, a pioneer of language teaching in modern times, extensive reading means: "to take a text, study it line by line referring at every moment to our dictionary and our grammar, comparing, analyzing, translating and retaining every expression that it contains" (Palmer1964:111)

This means that the texts should be read for the purpose of language study. Further as Simensen points out that extensive reading can counteract: "a tendency among foreign language learners always to regard a text as an object for language studies and not as an object for factual information, literary experience or simply pleasure, joy and delight" (Simensen 1987:42). According to Richards and Platt: "it is intended to develop good reading habit, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure and to encourage a liking of reading" (Richards and Platt1992:133) . Extensive reading is also called "Supplementary Reading" (West 1936:26) and "Free Voluntary Reading" (Krashen 993:56).

How can Extensive Reading be Integrated into a Reading Comprehension Course?

Extensive reading can be integrated as part of an existing reading course. This involves building into the existing course a certain amount of extensive reading. For instance ,the reading of a certain number of books or articles...etc per week or per semester both in class and for homework. In addition to in class reading, time can be set aside in the reading class for extensive reading related activities such as students' oral book reports, reading of students'

summaries...etc Thus, extensive reading can be done in and out of the classroom. Outside the class, it is encouraged, for example, by allowing students to borrow books to take home and read. This strategy requires students to read in quantity more than it is possible to do in the classroom. Indeed, much reading will have to be done by students for homework. Out of class reading is, therefore, a crucial component in building the habit of reading.

What are the main Objectives from such an Integration?

1/ To improve the students' language proficiency. For instance, it can play a key role in promoting learners' vocabulary knowledge (i.e. students can learn large number of new words). As stated by Coady : "there is a gradual but steady incremental growth of vocabulary knowledge through meaningful interaction with texts" (Coady 1993:18). Thus, a reading in which students read fluently and focus on the meaning of what they read can further facilitate comprehension. In this context, Geoff (2004:79-81) proposes seven characteristics or the qualities of a good reader which are summarized as follows:

- A reader knows that reading is a complex, intellectual endeavor requiring a reader to draw on a range of meaning – making skills. It means that before worthwhile reading engagement can begin, the reader has to be aware that some sort of meaning will be sought.
- A reader knows how to deploy previous knowledge of other texts to enable the effective meaning-making of the most recent textual encounter.
- A reader knows how to predict the way the text is likely to work, or be constructed, and can use that knowledge to confirm or re-adjust those predictions, depending on how typically the text proceeds.

- A reader knows how to be critically active before encountering the substantial body of any texts. Good readers are already asking questions of the text before engaging with the main content.

- A reader knows how to interact appropriately with a variety of text-types and genres.

- A reader knows why a text might not satisfy its original requirement, or why a text has been rejected, unfinished... In fact, knowing why texts have been chosen, and practicing the making of effective choices, is a vital reading skill. Some texts do not fulfill their initial promise.

- A reader knows that reading improves through self-monitoring of, and reflection on, own ability and progress.

2/ To improve the students' reading skill and reading speed (i.e. to promote students' reading ability and to enhance their motivation to read).

3/ To increase students' competences in writing, listening and speaking abilities. Students' spelling proficiency might also be developed for the more they read, the better their spelling.

Suggestions

For the purpose of attaining all the objectives stated above:

- Teachers are required to include extensive reading in their reading lessons. It should be done first in order to motivate students with negative attitudes toward reading to do the reading. It is not a matter of making the students read in quantity but of developing and encouraging in them a reading habit. By doing this we can form effective, proficient and lifelong readers.

- Extensive reading should also be an integral part of reading instruction because once providing the students with the material to be read such as: books, short stories, tales, articles...etc, asking them to write their reports, to give their oral reports or to expose them to their classmates and asking the latter to give their comments, the result is that we are promoting their language proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening.

- Teachers have also to choose the appropriate reading material (simple and suitable textbooks) in order to improve students' attitudes, motivation, understanding and responsibility for one's own learning. In this context, Nuttall C.(1996:126) proposes three main criteria for the choice of texts to be used in the classroom, which are suitability of content, exploitability and readability. Indeed, suitability of content can be considered to be the most important of the three, in that the reading material should interest the learners as well as be related to their needs. Exploitability refers to how the text can be used to develop the learners' competence as readers. A text, in fact, that cannot be exploited for teaching purposes has no use in the classroom. Readability is used to describe the combination of structural and lexical difficulty of a text, as well as referring to the amount of new vocabulary and any new grammatical forms. Consequently, it is important to assess the right level for the right learners. The following table, indeed, gives an explanation to the three criteria proposed by Nuttall.

Suitability of content	-Does the text interest the student? -Is it relevant to the student's needs? -Does it represent the type of material that the student will use outside of the classroom?
Exploitability	-Can the text be exploited for the teaching purposes? -For what purpose should the text be exploited? -What skills/strategies can be

	developed by exploiting the text?
Readability	-Is the text too easy or difficult for the student? -Is it structurally too demanding or complex? -How much new vocabulary does it contain? Is it relevant?
Presentation	-Does it look authentic? -Is it attractive? -Does it grab the student's attention? -Does it make him want to read more?

Table1: Important Factors in choosing Authentic Reading Materials
 Nuttall.C (1996:127) Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language

- Teachers should create a classroom environment that values and encourages reading. For example, they can bring a collection of books ,magazines...etc to the classroom and set up a class library and encourage the students to make their selection. Thus, students can improve their English by enlarging their vocabulary knowledge, promoting their writing grammar and developing their comprehension.

Conclusion

It should be concluded that reading can be considered as the key to develop the learners culturally, socially and emotionally. It is a combination of many skills, which ought to work in harmony; while extensive reading can be used as an effective technique to overcome most of the learners' difficulties in writing, listening and speaking. Therefore, the use of extensive reading in English Foreign Language classes is advocated to enhance learners' reading skill and to promote their foreign language acquisition.

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