Creating a Culture of Reading – Reading Circles and Class Libraries: Getting our Students to Read

Peter B. McLaren
Peter B. McLaren is an English Faculty member at Al Ain Women’s College, the Higher Colleges of Technology, U.A.E. He is currently undertaking doctoral studies with the University of Exeter, U.K.
Introduction

This paper will describe, with reference to the salient literature, two initiatives implemented at an Emirati tertiary institution which, it was hoped, would improve reading abilities. These approaches will be critically evaluated through the views of teaching colleagues, and to a lesser extent via student feedback. Gains, however modest, in reading proficiency will also be assessed, before suggesting the possible future direction of such initiatives aimed at creating a culture of reading and getting our students to read.

The Context and Problem

The two extensive reading initiatives described below were trialled with full-time students at a women’s campus at the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in the UAE. Their level of English was approximately IELTS 4.0.

In the first place, 97 learners at the same stage of their studies were categorised as being ‘at-risk’ of failure. These students were assigned to small remedial groups to work on their particular weaknesses – previous results and teacher perceptions dictated that reading (and to a lesser extent writing) was the key area of difficulty.

It was felt, across the teaching faculty at that level, that if we could interest our students in a more extensive reading approach, then as well as improving their reading abilities in examinations, it was also possible, according to Bell (1998) that these ‘weaker’ learners would improve their writing, extend their vocabulary and develop a more intrinsic motivation towards reading in their L2.

The Reading Circles initiative, based on the Oxford University Press’ Bookworms series (Furr & Bassett, 2007), requires students to take on different roles, both during class time, and when preparing at home. They read the stories and were also required to discuss various aspects of their role with the teacher and others in the group (groups are usually 4-6 in size). For example, the ‘discussion leader’ will prepare and pose questions about the action and characters in the story, while the ‘word master’ will exemplify and describe difficult pieces of vocabulary for the benefit of the group. There are 6 roles in all, complete with role cards (discussion leader, summarizer, word master, culture collector, connector and passage person), which should rotate after a suitable interval, e.g. after every story. For the purposes of this pilot study, only the first 3 roles were used.

The same underlying beliefs motivated the second of these initiatives. According to Krashen’s (2006, p. 2) ‘pleasure hypothesis’, learners who read for pleasure and enjoyment, rather than to prepare for tests and examinations still make gains in reading competency – at least as efficiently as when receiving direct tutoring in reading skills and strategies. This prompted the researcher, working with another group of learners, to expose them to an in-class library from which they could pick and choose what to read, where to read, when to read and how much to read.

However, it is all too easy, having identified our learners as reluctant readers, to simply assume that more reading will solve the perceived problem. Before looking more closely at the set up and outcomes of these initiatives, it is important to first critically review the relevant literature.
Extensive Reading

While the majority of scholarly articles on reading attainment still tend to focus on how to teach the various skills required to successfully decipher an L2 text, there is a growing body of research promoting the implementation of extensive reading activities.

Robb and Susser (1989) conducted an experiment with Japanese students, in order to compare reading test results from a group of learners who were taught reading skills in a traditional manner, with other similar students who followed a more extensive approach. By extensive reading (ER) they meant reading for pleasure, to understand the story and with little or no overt skills-based teaching (the same definition of ‘extensive’ used throughout this paper) – although some comprehension questions were used to encourage the students to read more and finish their texts. Robb and Susser (1989) utilised data from an attitude questionnaire to see if extensive reading was inherently more motivating and enjoyable.

Their results suggested that the extensive reading programme was as effective in terms of test results as the more traditional reading skills and strategies classes, with one major caveat. This was that although the extensive reading group attained similar levels of achievement as the control group, they might well have done so because they read far more than was initially asked of them. Therefore, extensive reading might not have been as efficient, class hour by class hour, as Krashen (1988, 2001, 2004, 2006) might have claimed. Nevertheless, their findings would appear to have important ramifications for students’ intrinsic motivational orientations towards reading more in their L2. Robb and Susser (1989) summarised their findings thus:

If the extensive reading procedure is as effective as the skills procedure in terms of test scores, the implications for the teaching of FL/EFL reading are profound. By reading what they choose and (more or less) enjoying their homework, students’ motivation to learn will increase, which will in turn benefit their eventual acquisition of the target language. (p. 7)

This is a theme that continues in Lee (1998, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007), with research primarily from Taiwan, that is in broad general agreement with Krashen (2004). Lee (2006) states that:

What is clear from the entire group of studies from Taiwan is that free reading works. In addition to its value in increasing test scores, reading results in increased knowledge of the world and subject matter knowledge, and is regarded by students as more pleasant than traditional instruction. (p. 8)

Although perhaps seen as an additional benefit of any ER programme, Lee’s (2006, p. 8), “increased knowledge of the world” is also an important consideration as Steffensen and Joag-Dev (1984) would remind us,

…that reading comprehension is a function of cultural background knowledge…If readers possess the schemata assumed by the writer, they understand what is stated and effortlessly make the inferences intended. If they do not, they distort meaning as they attempt to accommodate even explicitly stated propositions to their own pre-existing knowledge structures. (p. 61)

Mason (2006, p. 5), conducting his research in Japan with TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) preparation students, acknowledges the limited transferability of his small scale study,
yet still believes that his results indicate, “that it is possible to improve in a second language from input/reading alone, and that the benefits of reading extend to vocabulary and grammar.” Smith (2006), also teaching and researching in Taiwan, makes the more striking claim that, “doing ‘pure’ extensive reading with no supplementary activities was more effective in producing gains in English competence than intensive reading or extensive reading with supplementary activities” (p. 14).

The case for such extensive reading activities, based on their perceived direct and collateral effects, is also strongly argued for by Day and Bamford (1998), who cite many diverse studies detailing both the procedures to be followed and the advantageous outcomes of ER programmes. They list these advantages as: increasing the reader’s vocabulary, improving their knowledge of how the target language works, extending the learner’s grasp of different text type and genre, and increasing their knowledge of the outside world, all of which aids both fluency and comprehension. Yet more forcefully, Tudor and Hafiz (1989), Hafiz and Tudor (1989) and Mason and Krashen (1997) all claim gains in writing, as well as reading, proficiency as a direct result of extensive reading programmes.

Away from the Far-Eastern context, Bell (1998) reports favourably on a British Council initiative in Yemen, where he also connects an extensive reading programme not only to improved reading proficiency, but also to higher levels of motivation and thus to related gains in other skill areas such as writing. It is a familiar tale, whether from Elley and Mangubhai’s (1983) ‘book flood’ in Fiji, or from the more tempered conclusions of Lituanas, Jacobs and Renandya (1999), who believe that:

ER can play an important role in helping students gain in their level of reading skill. Reading skills and the benefits that flow from them are essential if students are to become people who, to paraphrase Friere (1970), use the word to know and change the world. (p. 104)

Perhaps the most important point to take from Lituanas, Jacobs and Renandya (1999) is that extensive reading programmes can help students to improve their reading and other skills proficiency levels, but there are no guarantees. Waring (2001) reviewing many of the above studies and several other notable pieces of research on ER as well, found many procedural and methodological flaws. Starting from the belief that most of the researchers wanted to find causal evidence of a link between ER and improved language skills, he notes unequal time distributions given to ER and control groups; a lack of time for any real language learning improvements to manifest themselves; variable sample sizes; unreliable statistics and not enough control exercised over external factors to name but a few.

However, despite Waring’s (2001) reservations he is still in favour of ER, albeit not exclusively or in too strong a version. And indeed, despite sharing many of Waring’s concerns, the fact that ER can help our students to engage more with the English language, to gain in confidence and motivational drive, as well as hopefully making genuine improvements in their language proficiency suggested that such ER initiatives are worthwhile in addition to the learners’ other, more traditional, classes.

These are sentiments echoed by Willis (1996). Although dealing more generally with task-based language learning, not exclusively this type of small group ER programme, Willis believes that such an approach creates opportunities for negotiating meaning, experimenting with learning strategies, and trying out new language in a non-threatening environment and thus helps students to gain confidence and so decrease the debilitating effects of L2 anxiety. Indeed, Saito, Garza and Horwitz (2002) highlight the negative aspect of text anxiety in L2 learning:
levels of reading anxiety were found to vary by target language and seem to be related to the specific writing systems. In addition, students' reading anxiety levels increased with their perceptions of the difficulty of reading in their FL, and their grades decreased in conjunction with their levels of reading anxiety and general FL anxiety. (p. 2)

The Reading Programmes

The first of the two initiatives was targeted at 97 ‘at-risk’ students divided into groups of no more than six who met with a teacher who set up a small reading circle based around the Oxford University Press (OUP) Bookworms series (Furr & Bassett, 2007) of graded readers and reading circle roles.

The primary idea was not to conduct traditional remedial reading classes, but to set the students tasks commensurate with their assigned roles – e.g. the ‘discussion leader’ was required to come up with a set of discussion questions based on the text by the following week, and then to conduct a small conversation about the story, which all the group members have read. Other students had other roles to perform (e.g. the ‘word master,’ charged with seeking out difficult pieces of vocabulary to explain to the peer group). As such, it was hoped that these roles, although detracting from Smith’s (2006) ‘pure’ extensive reading experience, would prove stimulating and, at the very least, motivate the learners to read, even if only in the sense of Deci and Ryan’s (2002, p. 17) ‘introjected regulation’ where certain learning behaviours, “are performed to avoid guilt and shame or to attain ego enhancements and feelings of worth.” In short, the students should be motivated to read the text in their own time to avoid being the only one who could not perform their assigned role properly in the following lesson.

Therefore, a small group of students (4-6 is recommended) worked both individually and then cooperatively on a story from the Bookworms series. In this instance, each student was assigned the role of ‘discussion leader’, ‘word master’ or ‘summariser’. They took the photocopiable worksheets (Furr & Bassett, 2007, pp. 77-78) supplied at the back of the graded reader and attempted the tasks. For example, the summariser completed a summary of the story, which they shared with the others at the next session. The summary sheet asked questions regarding the plotline, main characters, what they did and so on. Completion of these various tasks forced the readers to get involved in the story and to see it from different aspects (e.g. characterisation, linguistic content, cohesion etc.). Students then returned to their next reading session able to take part in interesting and stimulating discussions, at an appropriate level, about the story they have all shared in reading and preparing.

The graded readers were selected so as to be suitable for remedial students, with the lowest level available – the OUP Bookworms Bronze level (400 head words) – being used, since previous research (Grabe and Stoller, 2002) suggests that students will need mastery of approximately 95% of the words in the text in order to read fluently and easily, and so enjoy extensive style reading, rather than view reading as just another difficult L2 task.

The second initiative was more purely an extensive reading project. One of the researcher’s own classes were given access to an in-class library of similarly suitable graded readers (covering more than one level so that better students could choose to stretch themselves) and encouraged to read as much as they wished – although a minimum of one story per two weeks was set to ensure some activity from the more reluctant readers. Students were also encouraged to write short book reports, illustrated if they liked, for display, which their peers could read before choosing what to read next. This was designed to monitor the affective aspects of extensive reading, and to see if those who took the opportunity of easy access to the
ER project made progress with any of the aspects mentioned above – i.e. in reading proficiency, writing proficiency, vocabulary and motivational orientation. Also, in order to be as unobtrusive as possible no additional tests were administered as it was felt that the learners had enough reading, writing and other tests to negotiate and through which progress could be monitored.

**Discussion**

In the first initiative, the OUP-inspired reading circles initiative was assessed in three main ways: by looking at student attainment (generally, and more specifically in reading grades), through student responses to a basic post-project questionnaire, and from staff/faculty evaluations.

Unfortunately, as this project developed over time to address an immediate problem faced by our weaker (remedial) learners, it was not set up as a genuine experiment, complete with hypothesis and control group. Indeed, ethical considerations for the practising teachers precluded any notion of an experimental control design, since to have denied some of our ‘at-risk’ students the opportunity to participate in the reading circles initiative would have been unfair. Thus although 55 of the ‘at-risk’ category students made sufficient gains in reading (and writing) to achieve an accumulated passing grade (60% or more) by the end of the semester, it is not possible to say whether this was due to the additional reading programme or not. Other external factors might have influenced student attainment in ways that this small-scale project cannot account for.

The student attitude questionnaire responses were universally positive, with students reporting higher levels of motivation/desire to read, more enjoyment and a verifiable increase in the time spent on, and total amount of, reading. That said we should keep in mind the Hawthorne effect (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 116), where respondents have been known to report feelings in line with what they believe the researcher/teacher wants to hear.

Therefore, it is perhaps the written and oral responses of the staff administering the first initiative that are of most interest: at the very least, each member of staff expressed the belief that the project was of some value and worth continuing with in future semesters. Each staff respondent reported high levels of homework/reading completion (higher it was felt than would normally be the case), and appeared to believe that the learners were more engaged with the texts than is usually evident in traditional reading skills classes. The roles that students were asked to adopt were also seen as being motivating as staff reported moderate to high levels of interest when it the time came to swap roles and start on a new story. One respondent put it thus:

> They are all doing their reading homework and preparing for the next class. I think it works as they are certainly doing more reading than I expected and seem to enjoy the stories and the role cards. It’s more successful than I thought it would be.

This is an important point, as some members of staff were dubious as to the overall efficacy of this reading initiative. For example, two respondents felt that there was insufficient time to effect any real improvements in reading attainment, and one other teacher expressed the opinion that even the bronze level (400 head words) graded readers were too difficult for the weakest students (thus negating the pleasurable and motivating aspects of an ER programme). However, there was still near universal agreement that this project succeeded in terms of its affective influence.

Taking a Vygotskian socio-cultural view of language learning (Yu, 2004) it could be argued that even if the students did not have enough time to read extensively and make gains in proficiency,
grammar, spelling and writing skills, they were still able to achieve several of Willis' (1996) projected outcomes or purposes. Willis proposed that such activities not only create language learning opportunities in a non-threatening environment, but also helped students deal with their L2 anxiety. In other words, such small-scale initiatives can allow our weaker students, with suitable scaffolding and assistance, to develop confidence and motivation in their L2 reading, after which other more tangible results and evidence might eventuate.

In fact, it is this increasing desire to read and the amelioration of the ‘fear’ factor that was most evident in the second of these reading initiatives. The class library project was run with one of the researcher’s own classes, and although not every class had access to such resources, it would have been invalid to compare this class with others as each class at this level was partially streamed and thus started at different L2 language ability levels from each other.

Students were encouraged, but not overly coerced, to read freely from a variety of graded readers, which were either slightly below or slightly above the perceived current ability levels of the learners. As the project advanced, it became clear that the class was dividing into three distinct groups – those who did not read, those who read the bare minimum and those who embraced the opportunity fully and read as much as possible.

Unsurprisingly, this third group (of nine students) made greater gains than the more reluctant readers. A crude statistical check – all students completed a reading examination early in the semester, at mid-semester and for their final assessments – showed an impressive 12.5% average increase in reading attainment scores for these nine students, whereas across the rest of the class, average reading scores remained more or less constant (which does not rule out individual improvements; as assessments were gaining in difficulty and complexity). However, clearly the students who had made the decision to read extensively were benefiting. That said, drawing a simplistic causal line from reading more to getting better reading scores, especially in a relatively short period of time, runs the risk of oversimplification – all the more so as these reading initiatives were never designed to be verifiable experiments. Perhaps a better explanation of these particular students making short-term tangible gains lies once again with the associated affective factors.

Perhaps, with more and regular exposure to manageable and non-threatening texts in English, the students mentioned above have reversed the downward spiral of low achievement and, having gained in confidence with L2 English texts, been able to translate that into higher reading grades, even before improvements in reading skills, strategies and concomitant vocabulary gains have become evident.

**Conclusion**

Although not an L2 teaching and learning experiment in the classic sense, this paper has attempted to describe two small-scale initiatives designed to address the perceived weakness that many Arabic-speaking Emirati students have in L2 English reading. It was suggested that both the OUP Bookworms series (Furr & Bassett, 2007) with their associated reading circles, and the instigation of in-class libraries, were at least partially successful. Even though there is not enough evidence to suggest improved reading skills, strategies and grades (to assert such would require a more rigorous, longitudinal study), the creation of an environment in which reading in English need not be a stressful endeavour was felt to have been successful. For as Arnold and Brown (cited in Dörnyei, 2005, p. 198), claim, “anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process.” Thus, any initiative that decreases the potential for such text or other anxiety is worth following through in an attempt to get our students to read. All other hoped for gains (in proficiency, vocabulary and grammar) can only follow once such practices become regular, spontaneous and pleasurable.
References


