To What Extent Can Graded Readers Motivate Emirati Students to Become Extensive Readers?

A Case Study at Abu Dhabi Men’s College

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This study begins by discussing some of the reasons why Emirati students have difficulties when reading in English. It then goes on to outline some important concepts which are central to an extensive reading program: extensive reading and intensive reading, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, in particular: expectancy value models of learner motivation and the concept of flow. Next, the use and advantages of graded readers in the program is discussed. This is followed by a brief discussion of the background of the students in the study and the results of the pre-reading survey. Then, the approach and methodology used in the study is described, followed by the results of the post-reading survey. The Findings section examines the effects of the extensive reading program on the students’ reading. Finally, the feasibility and requirements of such a program are examined.

General Context of the Problem

The students in this study were in their first year foundation course at Abu Dhabi Men’s College, where this study was undertaken; all experienced difficulties with their reading in English. Shannon points out (as cited in O’Sullivan, 2004) that the main problem, apart from the way reading is taught in schools in the U.A.E. is that “there is a lack of a reading culture or reading habit in society because of the prized oral tradition in Gulf societies.” According to Hurreiz (2002), an oral tradition has been a central component in Arab culture for the study of the Arabic language, folklore and literature.

The question here is: can graded readers start students who have never read for pleasure and who have no experience at all of reading for enjoyment on a course of extensive reading? Extrinsic motivation has always been the tool used to motivate students, especially in The Gulf. The students can often be very competitive and for them, successful learning is often equated with getting good grades. Getting students to be intrinsically motivated to read is crucial to the survival of an extensive reading program and is its goal. The challenge for the teacher is remove the idea from students’ minds that reading is a boring and difficult necessity. It may be necessary, at the beginning of an extensive reading program, to use extrinsic goals usually associated with intensive reading, such as assessing students’ reading and giving marks or by follow-up work such as book reports, usually associated with intensive reading goals, in order to ‘kick-start’ the program. Indeed, it is possible that students who were previously extrinsically motivated readers will become intrinsically motivated if they find the experience of reading, without any ulterior purpose, a pleasurable one.

Theoretical Background

a) What is extensive reading?

In extensive reading students have far more control over their reading than they do in intensive reading programs. They are given a free rein to not only choose what they read according to their interests, but also the level of text they read, how much they read and how long they read. There are no follow-up tests on their reading, because these would place the emphasis on extrinsic motivation; i.e. reading for ulterior goals. The goal of an extensive reading program is the cultivation in our students of a set of positive experiences and beliefs related to their reading, in some cases in both their first and second languages. The purpose of this program is to develop intrinsic motivation in readers, to get them reading purely for pleasure and in doing so, to encourage students to read more and more in the target language, i.e. to read extensively. “Extensive reading is associated with reading large amounts with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material. Readers are more concerned with the meaning of the text than the meaning of individual words or sentences” Nation (1997). The rationale for introducing an extensive reading program is that this kind of reading gives students a far greater exposure to
reading in the second language than reading short texts intensively in the classroom for exam preparation or other academically-related goals. Extensive reading enables students to become fluent readers at their own speed and level. Krashen (as cited in Harmer, 1991) emphasizes the superiority of unconscious language acquisition over conscious learning and maintains that extensive reading encourages the former type of learning. Of course, students will still need to develop their intensive reading skills for school or college progress tests and international exams, such as IELTS and PET.

Schmidt (n.d.) puts forward some cogent arguments for the value of extensive reading programs. He supports the contention held by Krashen that a large amount of ‘comprehensible input’ is necessary for successful language acquisition and that extensive reading is “an effective and efficient path to obtaining input for acquisition.” Ellis (cited in Schmidt) argues that because there is a greater abundance of low frequency words in written texts than in everyday speech, students’ acquisition of new vocabulary will be enhanced more by reading. Gradman and Hanania (cited in Schmidt) point out the positive effect of extensive reading on all skill areas and note that the personal interest and enjoyment of the students in their study of the books they chose had a beneficial on both their attitude to English and test scores.

b) Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in reading in a second language

Concepts important to this study include the two main types of learner motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Central to the introduction of any extensive reading program is the extent to which learners can be motivated intrinsically. Intrinsic motivation is defined by Eccles and Wigfield (2002) as the enjoyment the individual gets from performing an activity or interest the individual has in a subject. Extrinsic motivation is related to the subject’s needs in relation to a goal perceived by him as being important. Thus, extrinsic motivation includes such goals as the need to pass exams or the desire to please parents, to seek approval from the teacher, to get higher marks and so forth.

Alderson (2000) argues that the quality of the outcome of reading is related to how readers are motivated. Extrinsically motivated students seem to read at a surface level, paying attention to facts and details, while intrinsically motivated readers pay attention to the main ideas, what the text is about, how the ideas in the text relate to each other and what is already known about the subject or the world. He also argues that intrinsic motivation leads to a higher level of understanding.

What is required is a change in students’ attitudes towards reading. According to Mori (2002), expectancy value models of learner motivation stress the importance of the following in motivating students to read extensively:

1. the materials used for reading,
2. the students’ reading ability in the second language,
3. students’ attitudes towards reading in the second language, and
4. their socio-cultural environment, which includes the influence of family and friends.

Dealing now with each of these variables in turn:

c) The materials used for reading

The materials that are used to teach reading in the classroom should be culturally correct, interesting, readily available and, most importantly, they have to be within students’ linguistic
ability. According to Birch (2002), many elementary second language readers become frustrated by the effort of trying to understand a text above their level and may become discouraged, either temporarily or permanently, from reading further.

d) The students’ reading ability in the second language

Bossers (as cited in Alderson, 2000) mentions the importance of first-language reading ability for reading skills in the second language. Poor first language readers make poor second language readers; of course the converse is also true. It is the contention of this paper that the carefully chosen, easy vocabulary and grammar of ‘graded readers’ pitched at the linguistic levels of the second language readers can help overcome this barrier of negative transfer of poor first language reading skills. Providing students, especially those at the lower ability levels, with simplified texts within their limited command of English means they are likely to be encouraged by their progress with ‘easy’ texts, rather than demoralized or discouraged by texts which are above their level.

In cases where reading is taught intensively, for example, to answer comprehension questions for exam practice, second language learners are often presented with texts which are above their level of understanding and thus, present them with great difficulties. Consequently they find reading in the second language a soul-destroying, painful and boring chore. There are two main factors which can motivate weak second language readers to begin reading for enjoyment in English: (a) the learners choose to read books because their topics or stories are of interest to them and, (b) the books are simplified down to their reading level. Leaver, Ehrman, and Shekman (2005) point out the importance of the book choices students make while learning a language.

If students find they are able to understand a basic text without any difficulty, there is a good chance they will change their attitude towards reading. Unless students have the opportunity of choosing reading materials that are both interesting for them and well within their reading ability, reading in the second language will always remain a boring and difficult chore. Bamford and Day (1998) point out any success in reading can make learners enjoy language learning and this may lead them to value their study of English.

e) The concept of ‘flow’

A concept of prime importance to this study is ‘flow’. Csikszentmihalyi (cited in Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) describes flow as a positive emotional state experienced by people when fully involved in what they are doing. Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as: “a) a holistic feeling of being immersed in, and carried by, an activity; b) a merging of action and awareness; c) a focus of attention on a limited stimulus field; d) lack of self-consciousness; and e) feeling in control of one’s actions and the environment” (cited in Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 113). It is usually obvious when people are in a state of flow because they usually appear to be intensely concentrating on what they are doing, while staying calm and relaxed.

The achievement of this state of flow in students while reading is the main goal of this extensive reading program, apart from improving their reading skills. Students should be able to experience total absorption in reading, they should experience the rapture of ‘being lost’ in a book, and having had that experience once only, should want to repeat it by further reading of the same kind. Flow of this kind is unlikely to be achieved in a purely intensive reading program, where students are compelled to read for extrinsic reasons, such as having to pass exams.

f) Why use graded readers?

According to Bamford and Day (1998) a great advantage of using graded readers is that students can choose material which is both suitable for their reading levels and related to topics they
are interested in; there is an abundance of published graded readers to cater for all students’ reading requirements.

Grabe and Stoller (as cited in Walter, 2000) maintain that it is essential that students gain what they term ‘word recognition automaticity’ by focusing on the 2,000 to 3,000 most common words in a language in continued extensive reading. After students have acquired this ‘foundation’ vocabulary, they recommend the use of computerized corpora to teach the vocabulary specific to the particular topics and fields of study the students need to learn at a later stage in their college programs. The use of graded readers in an extensive reading program is an excellent way to give students repeated access to these most common words. It builds both the foundation of the common, essential ‘core’ vocabulary of the language and gives students repeated practice in the kinds of ‘top-down’ reading skills they need to read any kind of text in the target language. A possible criticism of using graded readers extensively is that students might have low exposure to new vocabulary. However, graded readers will help them gain confidence in activating the vocabulary and syntax they already know through repetition and consolidation in the context of reading stories, whether factual or fictional. This study found that the relative grammatical and lexical simplicity of graded readers enables elementary students to easily understand the text, without having to struggle. Also, being able to choose what they read helps them to take an active role in their reading and can increase their motivation to read for pleasure.

Background of Students

The group in this study consisted of 19 Emirati students studying on the first year Diploma Foundation program at Abu Dhabi Men’s College, one of the 16 Higher Colleges of Technology in the U.A.E. Their level of English was elementary. They were doing a foundation program for a full-time diploma in a technical subject of their choosing. They were high-school graduates and had few study skills.

The pre-reading survey undertaken found that the students in this study had hardly any interest in reading at all, whether in class or in their own time. Indeed, many did not read in their own language. A reading interest survey, given prior to the implementation of the graded reader program, showed that 65% of the students surveyed almost never did any kind of reading. 25% said they only read outside school once a month. A further 10% answered that they read once a week. None of them read every day. Although the sample was small, with only 19 students, the results reflect the previous experience of the writer and are most likely a common situation throughout the Emirates. This clearly demonstrates the students’ unfamiliarity with this kind of reading and their almost total lack of commitment to it confirming the concerns expressed by O’Sullivan (2004).

Approach and Methodology

The main aim was to introduce ‘reading for pleasure’ using graded readers, initially using extrinsically motivated goals. When introducing the graded readers program the teacher explained the importance of graded readers in improving reading skills. To this end, the students were taken to the library and shown the entire collection of graded readers there. They were told to choose only the easiest graded readers, i.e. those readers which were classified at ‘Beginner’ level. This was to ensure that the books were well within their reading ability and that, hopefully, finding the reading easy, they would begin with a positive impression of reading graded readers. Also, the students chose what they wanted to read, so the enjoyment factor was maximized by their interest in the topics or some other features of the books.

Students were free to choose any book they wanted and were given 10 minutes of their class time to read. After the start, the main aim was not to interfere during the students’ reading
sessions in any way, except when students required help with unknown vocabulary and so on. The rationale here was two-fold, first, to observe flow as discussed earlier or lack of flow amongst the students as they read and, second, to encourage the students to read for pleasure by establishing the conditions where a normal reading activity in a ‘real life’ context could occur. During the sessions the teacher observed the students reading, from a distance and unobserved by the students. The reason for keeping this distance was in order to avoid the students’ hitherto dependence on the teacher for approval and support. The idea was to help them change their motivation for reading from an extrinsic orientation to an intrinsic, self-motivated orientation. According to Powell (2005) by eliminating follow-up comprehension checks and exercises and encouraging students to understand the general meaning rather than detailed comprehension, students are gradually weaned off word-by-word decoding at the sentence level.

After reading each book group discussions were encouraged through some questions such as:

1. What would your reaction be if you were the main character?
2. What part of the book would you like to change?
3. Do you like how the story ended? Why/why not?
4. What was the best part of the story?

Group discussions were encouraged to establish a relaxed environment for the students to enjoy the reading activity. The important issue at this stage was to promote reading amongst the students and therefore these questions were asked to check if they liked and understood the book and were asked in a way that showed that the teacher was interested in their opinions about the stories and were not asked to check their comprehension of specific details in the books.

**Post-Reading Survey**

This survey results (Table 1) were obtained from a questionnaire given to the students in the sample and was adapted from a questionnaire used in the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (see Deci & Ryan, n.d.). The purpose of this survey was to see if the students were motivated along the following parameters, as defined by the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory: 1) interest and enjoyment, 2) perceived competence, 3) effort and enjoyment 4) pressure and tension and 5) perceived choice.

Table 1. Intrinsic Motivation Inventory survey results. (N = 19 students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-Reading Questionnaire</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest and enjoyment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyed the story</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Found it boring</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t want class to end-wanted to continue reading</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted to have a break</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort and importance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tried hard to understand book</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t try hard</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived competence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt the book improved their reading skills</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t feel proud and felt unsuccessful</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure and tension</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt pressure to finish book</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t feel pressure to finish book</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Said they could choose book</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Said they couldn’t choose book</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

a) Observation of students and results of the post reading survey

Observations of the students who were experiencing the flow of reading were borne out by the questionnaire. The same students observed to be in the state of flow said that they did not want the class to end. These students did not even realize that the class had ended and had to be reminded. This happened on a number of occasions. If they had not been reminded, they would have continued reading. The students who found the reading boring were also those who were observed not to be in a state of flow, i.e. fidgeting, looking around and not reading continuously. 16 students said they did not feel any pressure to finish the book. 14 students said they did not try hard to understand the book because they were within their level. All 19 students felt the book improved their reading skills, which could be interpreted as the realization of improvement on their reading ability.

This showed that allowing students to choose graded readers well within their reading abilities was perceived by the students as being useful for their reading. Here, we can see students beginning to equate reading with enjoyment, rather than effort. Thus, one of the goals of an extensive reading program is that students should have a positive orientation to what they are reading and in this study this was beginning to happen. 15 students stated they felt free to choose the book they wanted; a key aim of the program. Later, there was evidence that students’ reading skills had already improved as a result of the program; they had been advised to start with the lowest level of difficulty, the ‘Easy Start’; but had now moved up two levels of difficulty to the Elementary level, entirely on their own accord and with minimal effort or difficulty. Within the first six weeks, signs of flow were observed in 3 or 4 students. The same students who appeared to be in this state later confirmed they had been enjoying their reading at the time. The students were beginning to become intrinsically motivated to read. They started to borrow graded readers of their accord. Furthermore, flow was observed on many occasions in class reading sessions; students continued reading and did not want to stop, even after the end of class. The number of students observed in this state increased significantly as the study progressed.

b) Teacher/student interviews

Interviews were conducted throughout the program to find out students’ favorite titles and authors and the reasons for their book choice. The following findings were obtained:

1. 15 students made a conscious choice of particular books because of the topic.
2. 15 students chose books because they were easy.
3. 12 students chose books by particular writers because they contained pictures and because of the ease of style and language.

When the program first started students chose books because they were easy. Later, they made more conscious choices based on topic. For example, four students chose King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and six students chose Tales from Arabian Nights. The second most popular choices were mysteries and detective stories. This showed that students were beginning, probably for the first time in their lives, to become interested in reading for pleasure. What is more, they were reading in a second language in which they were far from proficient. The students’ control over their book choice gave them a sense of responsibility and the reading they had done gave them a sense of achievement.
Conclusion

Introducing a routine graded reader program involves time and effort on the part of the teacher. However, if such a program is introduced gradually over a period of time, even when the semester begins, it not only improves the reading ability of the foundation students but could help reading become a hobby. This reading program extended over eight months and only took 10 minutes of class time, two or three days a week. The teacher’s long-term commitment is vital to the success of such a program. In addition, clear objectives about the purpose and direction of this kind of program are vital from the outset. The discussions about the books that the students read also have a positive effect on the development of speaking and listening skills. Library book-borrowing statistics can be helpful in indicating the popularity of certain books and types of books. Obtaining information from the librarian about the popularity of the books borrowed from the library is important as a first step in introducing the graded reader program. If needed, students can be encouraged to borrow stories familiar in their culture at the start of the graded reader program. One of the main benefits of this program is the ‘knock-on-effect’ it had on learner independence; the students were going to the library and choosing graded readers of their own accord without the need for any extrinsic reading goals.

This and other research on the subject has shown the undoubted benefits of an extensive reading program, especially for students for whom reading for pleasure is an alien concept and who find reading a difficult and boring chore. It should be part of any academic program of which English is a component.

Although the use of extrinsic motivation was initially to ‘kick-start’ the extensive reading program, the results above show that, by the end of this study, students were becoming intrinsically motivated to read graded readers in their own time.

References


