

INTRODUCING READING JOURNALS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we aim at presenting Reading Journals as an innovative tool within EFL settings. We tackle this issue from the point of view of the reader (as co-creator of meaning) rather than prioritizing only the meaning as simply expressed in the text. Thus we present the designing of a Reading Journal where self-perceptions and interests flow smoothly from the reader.

1. Introduction

Reading Journals are an interesting and motivating tool to implement extensive reading programs in the EFL classroom. We set forth the bases of a new way of approaching the Reading skill within the language classroom much closer to the students' self-perception of the reading process. Reading Journal, from our point of view, emerges as a motivation task which frees our students from the comprehension-evaluation oriented activities carried out for years in the EFL settings. We must provide opportunities where they can voice out their thoughts, where they do not feel assessment as the main goal, and where they can reflect upon their reading process. The reader is viewed as a co-participant in the process of transferring meaning to a given text. In this sense, reading entails an active interaction between the so-called reader's background knowledge and the text itself.

In this article, we firstly tackle some of the theoretical underpinnings where Reading Journals are embedded. Secondly, we describe the stages of our Reading Journal, and finally we raise some of the conclusions reached after its implementation in an EFL class.

The objectives we pursued with this extensive reading experience are:

- To analyze the individual reading process in EFL in order to gather information related to urgent problems or difficulties the readers were to face.
- To draw conclusions about the influence of previous knowledge in the reading process.
- To state the way reading in a foreign language affects the comprehension and interpretation of the text.

2. Extensive reading programs

In the field of reading in a foreign language, the latest trends argue a use of extensive reading to enhance the taste for reading and to improve students' literacy (Krashen 1993; Mason & Krashen 1997; Maley 1999; Kern 2000; Day & Bamford 2000, 2002; Brown 2001). The debate agenda on reading has been for years linguistic-laden. Reading a text was a useful task whenever fulfilled grammar requirements. Consequently, it demanded from the reader nothing but a passive role in the construction of meaning from the written text. An interesting alternative is born within extensive reading theoretical tenets, main focus being placed on enjoyment, learning, improving students' reading abilities, developing aesthetic taste, highlighting individual reception of the story, enlarging learners' vocabulary, and consolidating grammar-like issues. Thus, extensive reading offers the working framework to develop reading skill, linguistic competence, vocabulary, spelling, and writing.

According to Day and Bamford (2000: 7-8), the top ten principles for teaching of extensive reading are:

1. Students read as much as possible

2. A variety of materials on a wide range of topics
3. Students select what they want to read
4. The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding
5. Reading is its own reward
6. Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students
7. Reading is individual and silent
8. Reading speed is usually faster than slower
9. Teachers act as counsellors
10. Teacher is a role model of a reader for students

3. Approaches to Reading in a Foreign Language

There have been many attempts to describe what happens in the mind of the reader when processing a text in a foreign language. In the fifties and early sixties, researchers shed some light upon this issue but the advances referred only to the mother tongue reading process. However, some of the conclusions reached by those researchers were leaked into the foreign language field especially after Goodman's publication of his article "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game" in 1967. They came to be known as Cognitive Theories of the Information. Then, some advocated a bottom-up approach where textual meaning is built from the smallest linguistic units to the largest. In this way, the reading process is an activity guided by the surface structure of the text. The reader puts together letters to form words, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs in order to reach global meaning. In this model, reading is channelled into the search of structure de-codification.

Bottom-up processing is decoding individual linguistic units [...] and building textual meaning from the smallest units to the largest, and then modifying preexisting background knowledge and current predictions on the basis of information encountered in the text. (Carrell, 1998: 101).

Others were committed themselves to a conceptually-driven top-down approach which encourages the reader to make predictions about the text based on prior

knowledge. Its bases are to be found in the schema theory according to which schematic knowledge stored in the reader's mind guides reading comprehension. Reader draws predictions and inferences grounded in his or her background knowledge. Subsequently, s/he will contrast the new information with the already acquired, confirming or refuting his/her former hypotheses. Therefore, this approach stresses that reading is comprehension and interpretation-oriented.

A text contains many gaps; the reader must fill in those gaps, using background knowledge and inference. From this it follows that the result – the gist, or theme, structure – is a product of the text *and* the reader. (Gough, 1999: 8).

Finally, in the latest years, research points out towards interactive approaches which alternate strategies from both bottom-up and top-down approaches in a non-predictable order. The shift from one to the other is in close relation to the reader's interest, the objective(s) pursued, and the text's demands. The book entitled *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading*, edited by Patricia L. Carrell, Joanne Devine, and David E. Eskey in 1998, attempts to summarize main interactive approaches currently being developed by some researchers in the field.

[...] in practice a reader continually shifts from one focus to another, now adopting a top-down approach to predict the probable meaning, then moving to the bottom-up approach to check whether that is really what the writer says. (Nuttall, 2000: 17)

4. The Reading Journal

Any course of English as a Foreign Language being currently taught would, without doubt, recourse to written texts. For years, main focus has been placed on detailed exploitation of the written form (especially through comprehension questions, grammar-oriented tasks, de-contextualized lexical items...). Thus, the active role of the reader (as a co-creator of meaning) has been sidestepped for decades and the meaning itself has been the result of deciphering words denotatively. Today's research has shed some light on the benefits derived from the implementation of extensive reading to develop readers' literacy. As a result, Reading Journals emerge as a very useful tool to

foster readers' self-perception of the reading process (Krashen, 1993; Jiménez Jiménez & Ruiz Cecilia, 2004). Reading Journals, from our point of view, are envisaged as a non-prescriptive reading resource which is directed at expressing freely whatever arises during the reading process. We are interested in highlighting their aesthetic and self-reflective nature where intrapersonal wishes outweigh extratextual demands.

If we assume that Reading Journals are motivating tools for EFL students, we should stress some points which strengthen our approach. First of all, readers can experience a sense of freedom when reading, turning reading into a habit instead of an obligation. The evaluation nuances which use to accompany reading practice fade away. The Reading Journal, in this way, emerges as a resource of and for the reader. Thoughts, self-perceptions, self-considerations, cognitive conflicts... flow freely through the reading process in constant interaction with previously acquired knowledge from the reader.

Secondly, it is a very valuable instrument to attain an individual monitoring of our students' readings (either in process or already done). On the one hand, the teacher has accessed to important information through the Reading Journal. This may give him/her some hints on how to overcome possible students' reading difficulties or what was most enriching out of the text. In addition, it keeps track of our students' readings.

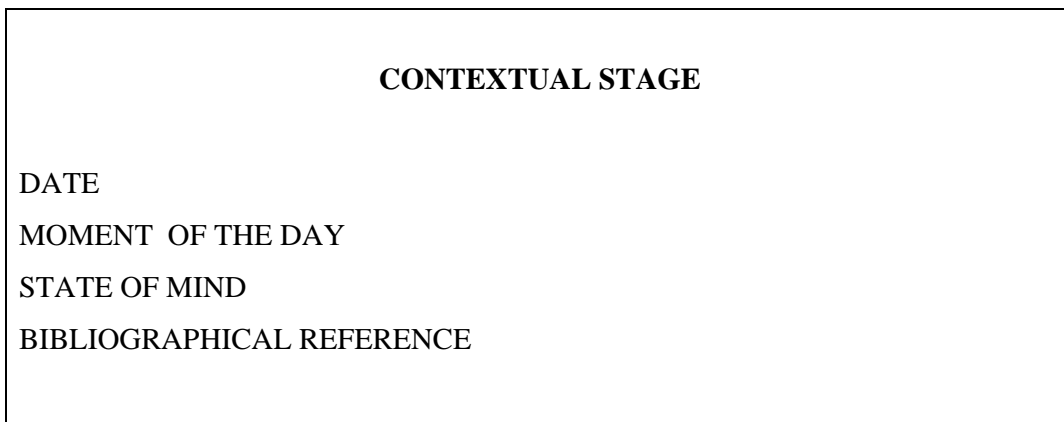
Thirdly, Reading Journals contribute to enhancement of critical and metacognitive thinking from readers. Students transfer their individual perception of the reading process to the written form turning, in this way, the mental process of reading into a recursive document.

Finally, we must highlight the emotional and personal nature which pervades the process of writing and creation of the Reading Journal. It is a totally open model which offers readers the opportunity to fully express themselves (from the emotions arisen from the very start to others awakened during the reading process itself).

In the subsequent lines, we will describe the four stages considered when designing this Reading Journal: contextual stage, pre-textual stage, textual stage, and post-textual stage.

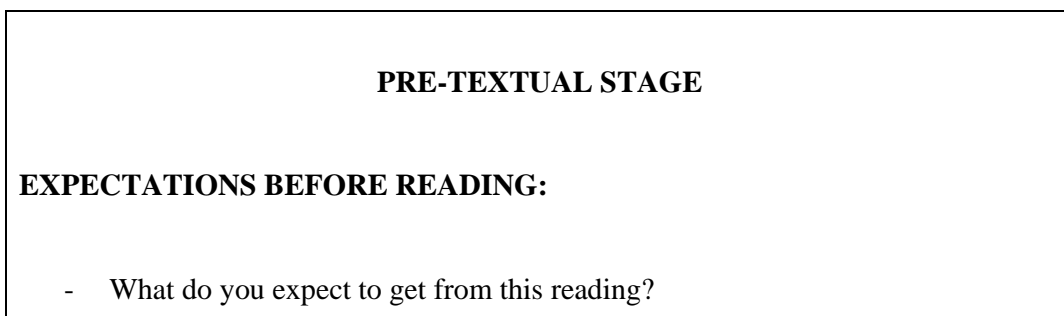
4.1. Contextual stage

The main goal of the contextual stage is to refresh the readers' mind and bring them back to the actual moment of reading. In this way they can retrieve important information and activate previously established schemata. We have dealt with it from three perspectives: space-time, reader's state of mind, and bibliographical reference.



4.2. Pre-textual stage

The aim of this stage is to raise student's interest in the text they are about to read. Reader states explicitly what s/he thinks would be the enrichment after fulfilling the Reading Journal. Besides, they activate background knowledge, if any, which may bear some relation to formal aspects of the text. We may want to emphasize the fact of not viewing the reader as a *tabula rasa* but as a subject capable of transferring knowledge, experience, opinions and prejudices to the text.



- From the title, what are your expectations? Do they have any relation to your prior knowledge?

4.3. Textual stage

Textual stage, without doubt, is the most complex one out of the four thought for our Reading Journal. Text is conceived as a multifaceted framework where reader's intentions, cultural context, and background knowledge merge with the writer's intentions, cultural context, and background knowledge. In the textual stage, main focus is placed on the conferring of meaning to the written text in such a way that interact with the reader's cognitive schemata.

The content fields covered in this stage of the Reading Journal are:

- Formal barriers (grammatical, pragmatic, morphologic, semantic...)
- Conceptual barriers
- Implication, experimentation, and personal meaning.
- And interpretation

The fact of having the interpretation of a story in writing is a very useful document to appreciate the reader's interpretative development through his/her lifespan. In a possible re-reading, the interpretation is susceptible of modification and/or enrichment from new experiences.

TEXTUAL STAGE

READING PROCESS:

- How did you sort out vocabulary problems?
- Did you have many grammatical problems? Did they interfere in your comprehension?
- While reading, did you translate into your mother tongue?
- Regarding the topics of the story, did you have any problem understanding them?
- What do you feel while reading?

- Do you identify with any of the characters?
- Which feelings are aroused in you by the content?
- Did your previous knowledge facilitate the comprehension/interpretation of the story?
- Did you get involved in the plot?
- What's your interpretation of the story?

4.4. Post textual stage

The last stage in the Reading Journal is called post-textual. The general purpose is to state explicitly whether the reading was enriching or not. The reader either recommends it (sometimes with a clear idea of a potential reader) or not. Next, they set forth the contributions and reactions from a personal level. Readers have to feel free to answer more or less precisely to the questions in the chart. There may be occasions where they have greatly enjoyed the reading but they may find difficult to transfer mental thinking into words. It is worth reiterating the non-prescriptive nature of this Reading Journal.

POST-TEXTUAL STAGE

EXPECTATIONS ACHIEVED OR NOT AFTER READING

- Would you recommend this reading?
- What are the main contributions out of this reading?
- What reactions did it arouse?

5. Implementation of the Reading Journal within the EFL classroom. Description of the experience

Respondents and the experience

The study was applied to six voluntary EFL students (three girls and three boys) aged 20 and with an intermediate level of English (the information regarding their level of attainment in the foreign language was obtained after they passed an intermediate Cambridge exam). They are studying to become English teachers at the Faculty of Educational Sciences in the University of Granada. They chose a short story entitled *Her Father's Attic* by Philippa Pearce (2002b). Then, they were instructed to complete the Reading Journal described above and submit it once done. No deadline was imposed though they all responded positively within the following twenty days.

5.1. Discussions of results

After having read the Reading Journals attentively and in depth, we draw the following conclusions:

Relaxed environments for reading greatly contribute to ease interpretation and to the involvement of feelings. All the subjects recognize themselves having chosen a moment of the day where they were quiet and stress-free.

In the reading process, readers hinted that the main problem to overcome is lexical items. Their reading process weakens and slows down whenever they clash with the lexical field in the text. They recognize using repeatedly reading strategies (guessing by context 54%, looking up in the dictionary 31%, ignoring the word 15%) in order to face cognitive lexical challenges.

When the reader retrieves past experiences and brings them to the reading itself, interpretation improves and inner feelings interact with the written information. Besides the meaning the story can project on each of the readers, there is a close relation between the previously acquired knowledge and the outstanding elements in the text. Thus, the degree of significance raised different reactions from the readers. This means that they stated different levels of involvement and fairly different interpretations. Subject 3, for instance, states that a well-remembered experience from childhood made her involve in the plot of the story so deeply that she even got to mix (at times) reality and fiction.

Metacognitive reflections contribute to the formation of independent, critical and well-aware readers provided that reading occurs in a non-prescriptive environment. The Reading Journal questions readers about the difficulties they have to overcome during the reading process and the strategies employed to surmount them. Mental processes are expressed in writing and allow students to reflect on them later in time (subjects 1, 3, 4, and 6 recognize to benefit from a re-reading of their own reflections).

Translation is a slightly resourceful tool in the reading process. Readers admit using it to keep their attention in difficult passages or where they are requested (guided for personal reasons and not for extra-textual demands) a more detailed analysis of the written information.

The recursiveness of the Reading Journal facilitates the comprehension of readers' own difficulties when reading in EFL. They become more aware of the interrelations between previous meaningful experiences and contextual factors which determine the reception of the text.

6. Conclusions

Reading is an animated process which calls for an active participation from the reader and the development of a sense of critical interaction. The text is an essential vehicle to interchange ideas, open cross-cultural dialogues, and relativize readers' own environment. When readers find relationships between the story and their lives, everything becomes much more meaningful, much more gripping, much more interesting. Reading, in this way, consolidates the different angles from which a text in EFL can be approached. More interestingly, the philosophy underlying the extensive reading approach allows the readers to re-emerge much stronger, prioritizing their reading interests and naturalizing the reading practice in EFL.

In this paper, we have highlighted the main reasons as to why we should use Reading Journals in the EFL classroom. Reading Journals have shown to be an effective way of motivating students, enlivening the reading process, and raising readers' self-awareness towards Reading in a Foreign Language. All our voluntary subjects gave us

positive feedback after having submitted it and they were all eager to participate in future reading experiences. They pinpointed the sense of freedom involving all the stages of the Reading Journal and the reflection aroused during and after completing it.

It is also worth stressing the fact that lexical questions mediate in the comprehension and interpretation of the text. According to the data obtained from our voluntary subjects, their reading process slows down whenever they have to decipher too many unknown words. Moreover, they recognize having skipped or ignored those passages which were too complex from a lexical perspective. Hence vocabulary is a key factor in consolidating the reading skill, we need to foster reading strategies among our students. The teacher should provide them with effective tools to unravel the lexical mysteries of the text.

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