

REFLECTION ABOUT INCREASING STUDENTS' MOTIVATION FOR READING IN EFL CLASSES THROUGH USE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS THAT SUPPORT CREATIVE PRODUCTION OF LANGUAGE

REFLEXIONES SOBRE LA MEJORA DE LA MOTIVACIÓN DE LOS ESTUDIANTES PARA LA LECTURA EN CLASES DE ILE A TRAVÉS DEL USO DE MATERIALES AUTÉNTICOS QUE FOMENTEN LA PRODUCCIÓN CREATIVA DEL LENGUAJE

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Abstract

Students of English as a foreign language on the secondary level seldom engage in voluntary reading of English language materials, even though they possess the necessary skills to approach the text. One of the factors that influence this decision is the lack of exposure to the authentic reading input in the EFL classroom environment. This paper through examination of primary research and secondary sources provides an overview of main and supplementary teaching materials (textbooks, graded readers) used for improvement of reading comprehension in EFL classes. Subsequently, it discusses the importance of motivation and influence of Matthew effect – both crucial elements for development of independent reading. As a result, this paper offers a selection of books, originally written for the native audience, which can be implemented in EFL classes to increase motivation and foment extensive reading. Finally, it discusses the ways of checking the reading comprehension among EFL students and proposes creative writing as a replacement of mechanical textbook activities.

Key words: reading comprehension, graded readers, authentic materials, Matthew effect, motivation

Resumen

Los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en el nivel de secundaria rara vez se comprometen voluntariamente a leer materiales en inglés, aunque poseen las habilidades necesarias para abordar el texto. Uno de los factores que influyen en esta decisión es la falta de exposición a materiales de lectura reales en el entorno de una clase inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). Este artículo, a través del análisis de trabajos investigación primaria y fuentes secundarias, proporciona un resumen de materiales didácticos principales y suplementarios (libros de texto, lecturas simplificadas) que se usan para la mejora de la comprensión lectora en clases de EFL. A continuación, se discute la importancia de la motivación y la influencia del efecto de Mateo – ambos elementos son cruciales para el desarrollo de la lectura autónoma. Como resultado, este trabajo ofrece una selección de libros, originalmente escritos para una audiencia nativa, que pueden emplearse en clases EFL para aumentar la motivación y fomentar la lectura extensiva. Finalmente, se discuten las formas de comprobar la comprensión lectora entre estudiantes EFL y se propone el uso de la escritura creativa como sustituto de las actividades mecánicas que habitualmente incluyen los libros de texto.

Palabras clave: comprensión lectora, lecturas simplificadas, materiales de lectura reales, efecto de Mateo, motivación

1. Introduction

Teaching reading comprehension in the EFL classroom is often a hard task, mostly when the teachers deal with predefined texts that have virtually no appeal to the students. It comes to no one's surprise then that the students lose interest in reading in foreign language altogether. In this article, I would like to present a short overview of how the textbooks introduce students to reading texts and what activities are presented to them to check their reading comprehension. The use of the supplementary material consisting of carefully selected reading texts as well as implementation of the graded readers books will be mentioned as a step towards the search for way of sparking students' motivation for independent reading. Categorization of readers based on the influence produced by the Matthew effect will be briefly discussed together with vicious and virtuous cycles of readers. Subsequently, I will offer six particular options of authentic unabridged material that can be used in the EFL classroom. Finally, each of the offered option could be then turned into a base for multimodal text writing activity that pulls together different learning styles, providing a counterpart to the simple vocabulary listing and comprehension questions.

2. Materials and implemented methods

The purpose of this paper – to offer a reflection on motivation for reading– has been accomplished in several steps. Firstly, in order to examine materials that are in use in the EFL classrooms, two types of sources were considered – the primary research and the secondary sources, obtained through consultation of preliminary sources (various databases including ERIC). Enquiry with key words brought forward the primary research that included studies such as Hill's (2001) review of graded readers. This work offered valuable insights into development and use of graded readers in EFL classrooms.

Published books such as Nuttall's (1982) *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language* represented the secondary sources. Nuttall's insights allowed for analysis of EFL textbook layout and strategies used for choosing the complementary reading texts. Two textbooks used for teaching EFL were compared and contrasted – Pulse Student Book from 2014 by Catherine McBeth and published by McMillan versus Headway Student Book from 1991 by John and Liz Soars published by Oxford University Press. Both were chosen for comparison based on the time of publishing. Secondly, Matthew effect in reading was described and applied to the concept of motivation in reading. This was accomplished through Stanovich's (1986) paper on the topic and by Nuttall's presentation of virtuous and vicious cycles of readers.

Based on these observations, practical suggestions were made for authentic reading material that can be used to foment independent reading in EFL classes. Criteria for inclusion of books listed in this section included time of publishing and relevance of topic as well as appeal to readers in the secondary level of education. Finally, the last part of this paper concentrated on checking reading

comprehension by written output. This part made use of several cases of primary research. Sakurai (2017) examined relationship between authentic reading material and grammar and vocabulary acquisition; Haiyan & Rilong (2016) focused on alignment-oriented approach, while Kılıçkaya and Krajka (2012), Morrison et al (2002) and Jacobs (2007) concentrated on use of comics as a written output.

3. Textbooks, supplementary materials and graded readers

Reading is one of the four core skills that are in focus in the foreign language classroom. Students at the secondary level have already mastered the skill of reading in their L1. However, Nuttall (1982: 19) points out that “in FL learning reading is often used for purposes which are different from those found in mother-tongue leaning”, namely that the main reasons for reading in foreign language classroom is “to teach the language itself.” Textbooks for teaching languages incorporate reading at the beginning of each unit where it usually comes in the form of an opening paragraph or as a larger text further in the unit. Students are well accustomed to this type of presentation – they start with pre-reading activities and after the reading is accomplished, students are asked to work on post-reading activities that consists of mix of gap-filling exercises, true/false questions and core vocabulary. Texts are usually simplified, focusing on the main elements from the unit.

In fact, reading texts are standardized to the point that Nuttall (1982: 19) provides their following five main characteristics:

1. To accommodate a chosen tense or another element of interest, reading texts often deviate from their natural form
2. Reading texts often imitate oral communication patterns
3. Topics used for reading texts usually belong to the category of common knowledge and focus on formulaic expressions instead of the message
4. Reading texts usually include more information that would be normally conveyed in an authentic text and leave no room for guessing
5. Importance of the reading text is in its structure instead of its meaning

Reading such texts is aimed at using bottom-up strategies where the primary focus is on the text, in particular at the word and sentence level. Top-top down strategies on the other hand focus on the reader and call for activation of the background knowledge and values (Carter & Nunan 2001). This division is visible by looking at particular textbooks such as Headway Pre-Intermediate Student’s Book which sets as the main aim of reading the text comprehension and consequently seeks answering questions about text to open a discussion afterwards. Text is not being read for pleasure; rather it is a search for information – a task that has to be accomplished. Once the reading is over, the whole class moves on to the next activity, leaving the text to fade away. Based on the same book, reading text that

appears under Skills Development section is not always explicitly connected to the writing activity of the same unit.

New editions of textbooks such as Pulse Student's Book published in 2014 presents reading activities that are similar to the ones in Headway but also incorporate new part called Integrated skills which connects all four skills starting with reading. Nevertheless, orientation of the text is practical; students read and produce product reviews, formal and informal letters, biographies and such. This type of reading activity offers students very little motivation to pursue further reading in a foreign language. As Nuttall (1982: 20) points out, "giving a lesson based on a text is not the same thing as giving a reading lesson."

One of the options to enhance the variety of texts would be providing students with extra readings that can be found in collections of supplementary materials for language teachers. These offer compilations of authentic reading materials aimed at a certain level. However, using this type of resource presents various obstacles, which I will briefly discuss by using the example of book named *Authentic Reading* by Catherine Walter. First, the author informs us that she has "chosen texts that might be read by an adult of average intelligence and varied interests" (Walter 1982: 12). Second, she admits that the majority of texts are taken from magazines, brochures and newspapers and only few of them are in fact literary texts. This basically means that students are exposed to the set of texts that resemble more a course in EAP. This idea is supported by the strategy proposed by Walter – summarizing the texts, with focus on accurate comprehension and reading for specific information. The author also mentions that the book would be suited for students who prepare for examinations. Third, the publishing date (1982) deems is out of date for use in the contemporary classroom. To sum up, it is possible to see why this kind of material would not be motivating to students.

Taking into consideration previous points it becomes clear that reading in the classroom is driven by the extrinsic motivation. Students read in order to complete comprehension exercises and to pass exams. They practice skills that belong to the category of intensive reading and focus on accuracy, implementing strategies such as skimming and scanning. Even students who might enjoy reading in their native language might be discouraged from reaching for book in English. Teachers try to remedy such situations by assigning class a graded reader. These readers should help students to complement their reading by providing them with texts that belong to the category of extensive reading and focus on fluency.

Hill (2001: 303) in his survey about graded readers published in *ELT Journal* states that students perceive foreign language learning as a monotonous and non-inspiring activity. One of the main reason for such statement is that students see their skills improve slowly and therefore are gradually losing motivation. In this case, graded readers can provide them with the possibility of practicing their skills, reading at the appropriate level. However, Hill (2001) also admits that the graded readers, even though they have been produced and consequently improved during the last 60

years, suffer from some drawbacks. The most prominent one is connected with rewrites of famous works by authors who lack appropriate skills and fail to create strong storylines that would hold the attention of readers. Nevertheless, graded readers could help student to improve their fluency since they allow students to read at the level where they understand 95% of the text (Hill 2001: 305). To sum up, following quote explains the difficulty of incorporating graded readers in the class curriculum: “If a teacher answers a reluctant reader’s question ‘Why should I spend time on reading books’ by saying, ‘It’s enjoyable,’ he invites the immediate rejoinder, ‘Not for me.’ If he says, ‘Your proficiency increases with practice without your realizing,’ he invites the equally deflating response, ‘How?’ (Hill 2001: 308).

4. Motivation and Matthew Effect

What could be done then to increase motivation for reading? We have already said that the students are provided with variety of reading techniques within the classroom environment. They learn how to read for specific information, skim, and scan, summarize text, and extract vocabulary. They also have a chance to sample a graded reader that resembles a real book. Nonetheless, all this time the input provided to students is somewhat odd and artificial. Students do not read because they are not motivated and they are not motivated because they do not have appropriate materials to read. This situation can be remedied by using authentic reading materials.

Various authors discussed implementation of authentic reading materials and advantages that such implementation brought to students. According to Berardo (2006: 64), the benefits of authentic reading texts start with increasing motivation. They also provide students with cultural insights, allow them to come in contact with the real language outside of classroom context and are better adjusted to their interests. Last but not least, such material also proves to be an inventive way of presenting the topic of independent reading to students.

Another strong point in support of using authentic materials is mentioned by Stanovich in his paper *Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy* – vocabulary acquisition. There are three points that are particularly interesting for this paper. First of them is that “the bulk of vocabulary growth does not occur via direct instruction” (Stanovich 1986: 379). This would mean that memorizing vocabulary lists in isolation has no long-term effect on building students’ vocabulary. Secondly, Stanovich (1986: 380) lists findings by Nagy et al. who established that the acquisition occurs in unplanned way while reading when the words are inferred from the context. These words greatly contribute to forming of reader’s vocabulary. The third point is connected to the general “agreement among researchers that reading is a significant contributor to the growth of vocabulary” (Stanovich 1986: 379). After considering these points, it is possible to see direct relationship between reading and vocabulary acquisition.

As we can see, reading is in great deal responsible for vocabulary of students. More they read, more they acquire. What comes in action here is the Matthew Effect. The term was coined by Wahlber in 1984 and based on Gospel according to Matthew, which could be simplified into saying that that the rich will become richer and poor will become poorer – hence the name (Stanovich 1986). It refers to achievements of students who performed well right from the entry into the educational system and therefore progress faster than students who underperform, consequently lose motivation and enter into a circle of negative reinforcement. Stanovich (1986) applied the theory of Matthew Effect to the reading. One of the most important factors he mentions is the environment that shapes the individual readers. Students, who possess larger starting base, were usually exposed to stimuli rich environment at their home where they had access to reading materials. Consequently, they seek out more information through reading, by interacting with people who contribute to their knowledge base, such as friends who read and through their parents who support their reading habits. These are the students who at entering the education system are at advantage, predisposed to acquire more knowledge. On the contrary, students who lack such stimulating environment usually perform worse and are consequently categorized as weaker readers and grouped together. The unfortunate result of such grouping is then further lowering of their performance due to the missing stimuli.

This leads us to what Nuttall (1982: 167) defines as a “vicious circle of the weak reader”. The reader moves through four phases such as ‘doesn’t understand’, ‘reads slowly’, ‘doesn’t enjoy reading’, ‘doesn’t read much’ that repeat itself. On the contrary, the advanced reader, as discussed earlier within the Matthew effect enters into four different phases of “the virtuous circle of the good reader” which are as follows: ‘enjoys reading’, ‘reads faster’, ‘reads more’, enjoys reading’ (Nuttall 1982: 168). Stanovich (1986) in examination of the ways in which the negative circle can be broken mentions that the most challenging area of intervention would be the home environment where educators have little power to establish any changes. It is therefore up to the teachers in the foreign language classroom to provide students with two main stimuli for extensive reading – “requiring them to do so and tempting them to do so” (Nuttall 1982: 168).

5. Choosing the right book

One of the possibilities when it comes to choosing a book that would both motivate and interest the students is to follow a strategy of narrow reading, where readers concentrate on the work of one author, or in the other words, they would read a book that belongs to the series. Advantages, as mentioned by the authors of the article *The Effects of Narrow Reading of Authentic Texts on Interest and Reading Ability in English as a Foreign Language* would be in providing students with familiar context where they encounter the same characters and can build on the previously acquired vocabulary. This would in turn help them with comprehension since the books used in their study were unabridged authentic material (Cho, Ahn, & Krashen 2005: 59).

There are four basic rules that should be taken into consideration when it comes to choosing the right book for extensive reading (Nuttall 1982: 171):

1. The book should be appealing to the students
2. It should be easy enough to read
3. As to not discourage the student the book should be short
4. The choice of books should be varied to cater for different students

With this in mind, I would like to propose several books that could be used for the extensive reading at the secondary level in the Spanish education system - ESO. First two of the mentioned books also fulfil the above-mentioned requirement of narrow reading:

- *Middle School – The Worst Years of My Life* is a book by James Patterson and Chris Tebbetts, illustrated by Laura Park. This book is the last of nine books with the same main character, Rafe Khatchadorian. The book has been recently turned into motion picture and is available through Netflix.
- *Diary of the Wimpy Kid*, written and illustrated by Jeff Kinney. Up to date, there are in total 12 books and four complementary books in the series, following the life and adventures of the main character, middle-schooler Greg Heffley. Four of the books were made into movies. The book series have been translated into Spanish as *Diario de Greg*.

One of the features that unites these three books is the visual element that makes them more attractive, provides context and helps readers to infer information from the text. It could be argued that another one is the fact that the main characters of each book is a male student at the middle school level. As it was already mentioned before, one of the important points is to provide variety so that student can choose the book that is the most appealing to them. This assures that students can find a book where they can feel identified with the main character, which in turn would keep them motivated in reading. To this end, I propose following books that have been categorized as graphic novels:

- *Frazzled: Everyday Disasters and Impending Doom* written and illustrated by Booki Vivat follows the life of the middle schooler Abbie Wu who worries a lot about everything. So far this the author's debut.
- *Invisible Emmie*, written and illustrated by Terri Libenson, also an author's debut, tells us about the life of two middle-school girls, artistic Emmie and athletic Katie.

Finally, to be sure that we can cater for diversity as well, here is the proposal for two more books that can be used in order to introduce students to topics that could be further discussed in the classroom:

- *El Deafo* written by Cece Bell is a graphic novel about a school girl with hearing aid, trying to make friends in a new school. It is also an autobiographic reflection of the author.
- *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* written by Jack Gantos deals with the issue of hyperactivity in children through the situations Joey encounters in his daily life.

The main advantage of above-mentioned books is the possibility of connecting their topics to the class teaching. In fact, some of them offer educator's guide that provide teachers with discussion topics, such as the ones available for download from James Patterson official website – family, bullying, adversity, etc. (Patterson 2017).

6. Checking reading comprehension

Recent study carried out in Japan investigated 157 university level students and looked for relationship between extensive reading and writing output. Author of the study came to several conclusions about extensive reading and its influence on the writing. First, “the results showed that the amount of reading made a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of vocabulary and grammar” (Sakurai 2017: 142). Extensive reading helped the readers activated the grammar knowledge acquired during the earlier stages of their study, namely in the years that preceded the college (Sakurai 2017). Another interesting outcome was that the cohesion and coherence of the text depended on the type of the book – students who focused on graded readers usually produced output that was limited by vocabulary and grammar structure; therefore, the authenticity of input proved to be important (Sakurai 2017). Study carried out in Chinese EFL classroom with focus on the alignment-oriented approach works in support of this finding by stating that “learners report being greatly influenced by their reading experience in their writing process, for instance, their lexical choices, writing coherence and tense usage.” (Haiyan & Rilong 2016: 76). As Haiyan & Rilong further affirm, “the previously-read text primed students' later use of language” (2016: 82).

There are various way in which the teacher can check the comprehension of the text. Nuttall (1982: 190) offers the idea of combing the intensive and extensive reading in the following way: Readers read the book at home and then one chapter that is highlighted is read in class – because of the character, or twist in the plot, or because it has something to do with the rest of the classes. Everyone has to read it at home, do some tasks and then discuss it at class together. However, I would like propose an outcome of reading that involves combination of various skills. The reason for this is to maintain the motivation of students. The extensive reading material is generally assigned to be read outside of active classroom hours as a complementary tool to enhance their reading while hoping to get them into the virtuous circle of the good reader.

As mentioned at the beginning, testing of reading comprehension mainly consist of gap-filling exercises, true/false questions and core vocabulary. While these tasks are effective, they do not support creativity and there is a possibility that they will negatively influence students' motivation. An average student would be able to accomplish them without paying close attention to the text. As we know, students usually belong to different categories of learners. Based on their preferred learning style we distinguish between “visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, tactile, group learning and individual learning” (Wintergerst et al 2003: 88). Wintergerst et al (2003: 86) mentions that learning styles, same

as personality, change overtime by experience and by exposure to different teaching techniques. A writing production activity that takes into consideration these categories would enable students to produce a complex answer to comprehension questions while keeping them involved. I propose as a medium that can be used in this case the comic strip.

The word ‘comic’ has somewhat negative connotation in the secondary education. Comic books and their implementation in the curriculum of the second language classroom have been met with mixed feeling from educators and even more confused reactions from parents. However, studies such as the one carried out in 2012 by Kılıçkaya and Krajka where they observed the influence of comics’ production on EFL students’ grammar and sentence writing prove otherwise. In the questionnaire distributed to students, 96% of them responded that they enjoyed making the comic strip, even though the topic was set as grammar (Kılıçkaya and Krajka 2012: 163). In addition, they were able to produce longer and more complex sentences while keeping their motivation high.

Walter (1982) in her set of reading texts proposes the technique of summarizing in 15 out of her 24 units. Producing a summary requires critical thinking in order to extract the most important information from the text. Morrison et al (2002: 760) in their article named *Using student-generated comic books in the classroom* affirm that “constructing a comic book requires students to determine what is most important from their readings, to re-phrase it succinctly, and then to organize it logically”. Moreover, as mentioned by Jacobs (2007: 21), comics present a multimodal text where written text coexists and shares its importance with visual, audio, and spatial patterns that construct meaning.

7. Discussion

The main reason why is it necessary to reflect about reading materials used in EFL classroom is the summarized in the words of González Otero, who argues that “the materials which are being used have not evolved at the same pace as the reality of our students” (2016: 84). In fact, the environment changes so fast that the textbooks are almost out of date before the time they reach the students in classrooms. Books used for graded readers – as an example, *Treasure Island* was published in 1881, *Peter Pan* in 1904 – do not provide students with characters they can emphasise with. While important to general knowledge about literature, they fail to attract students who find the language complicated and discouraging. .

Extensive reading in foreign language is an important part of language learning process and vocabulary acquisition. Previously mentioned concepts of Matthew effect (Stanovich 1986) and circles of readers (Nuttall 1982) lead into the notion presented by Guo (2012). In his article *Using Authentic Materials for Extensive Reading to Promote English Proficiency* Guo states that “one exposure to a vocabulary word is insufficient to sustain vocabulary knowledge; therefore, continuous exposure to a large quantity of texts is necessary to retain vocabulary and to ensure greater reading comprehension

and, therefore, better reading fluency” (2012: 203). However, concerns from students and teachers alike might arise about implementation of very particular books together with the fear of acquiring vocabulary that is not as particular as in case of graded readers.

Why not to use the simplified texts then to avoid this situation? The answer can be found in the quantitative study carried out by Baleghizadeh with the EFL students in Tehran. Her findings affirm that “negotiation for meaning between the learners and the teacher is a better device for increasing reading comprehension than manipulating texts through simplifying them” (Baleghizadeh 2010: 26). Baleghizadeh (2010) further elaborates on implementation of interactional approach. In this case the role of the learner changes from answering questions to actively posing them, just like in real life interactions, to enquire about details of the text and the need to provide comprehensible input is covered by negotiation of meaning.

Within Spain, we are talking about EFL instead of ESL classes, which means that students lack exposure to English language outside of classroom environment. Reading of authentic materials in form of unabridged books selected to match both interests and abilities of EFL students can constitute their first contact with unmodified language. Moreover, study carried out by Ortell that focused on use of literature in EFL classrooms in Spain, asserts that “young adult literature works can be used as an instrument to implement reading habits and skills and as a prelude and bridge to canonical literature” (Ortell 2013: 94). To sum up, benefits and drawbacks of use of authentic materials have been discussed by various researchers; however, “regardless of the challenges, classroom use of carefully selected authentic materials can significantly enrich EFL teaching and learning” (Thomas 2014: 16).

8. Conclusion

Talking to a high school student who just moved to the next level in the secondary education (Bachillerato), we spoke about supplementary reading materials they used while he was studying in ESO. He briefly recalled two graded readers he was obliged to read for his class. One of them was Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe; he did not remember neither the name nor the genre of the second one. When asked if he enjoyed reading in English he said that does now since his fluency increased, confirming the Matthew effect in action. I asked him what was the first book he completed on his own in English. He replied *The Diary of the Wimpy Kid*; the book he got as a present from his uncle’s visit abroad. He was already familiar with the layout and the theme as the same book has been translated into Spanish. What struck me the most was his remark that it was the sense of accomplishment of being able to finish on his own a book that did not belong to the official curriculum. This example, albeit very specific, could be used to illustrate the situation of the secondary level students in Spain who are learning English as a foreign language. Even though the books I proposed might seem of little literary value compared to abridged classics of graded readers, they seem to accomplish the main aim

of supplementary reading in the foreign language classroom – provide motivation to help the readers transition from the vicious into the virtuous circle of the good reader.

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