ENGAGING STUDENTS IN EXTENSIVE READING THROUGH LITERARY TEXTS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract
Much has been written about the benefits of extensive reading, which include increased positive attitudes towards reading, increased scores in reading comprehension ability and increased reading speed and fluency. Well-implemented extensive reading programmes can thus improve students' reading competency and motivate them to read more. As a result of their wide reading, they are more likely to increase their knowledge, which lead greater linguistic and academic competence. This paper argues for the use of literary texts to engage students in extensive reading in the EFL classroom. In addition to improving their linguistic ability, the students are exposed to creativity in language, to different social and culture worlds embedded in texts, and to enjoyment through the reading of literature. Various strategies for using literary texts such as reading aloud, organizing literary reading circles, complementing extensive reading with intensive reading of literary texts, book cluster selection will be discussed in this paper.

1. INTRODUCTION

Much research has documented the strong correlation between independent reading and academic achievement (Kirsch et al., 2002), and extensive reading has been widely promoted as a strategy for increasing and improving student reading (Krashen, 2004). Extensive reading can lead to increased reading speed and fluency, vocabulary gains, increased score in reading comprehension skills and most importantly, increased positive attitudes towards reading (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). Well-implemented extensive reading programmes can thus improve students' reading competency and motivate them to read more. As a result of their wide reading, students are more likely to increase their knowledge, which lead to gains in academic achievement (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Since motivation is an important factor in students' choice to read voluntarily (Gambrell, 2013), motivating unengaged readers to read should be one of the most important aims of extensive reading.

This paper argues for the use of literary texts to engage students in extensive reading in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The success or failure of extensive reading programmes can be measured by whether students are encouraged to read independently and whether students are given the opportunity to read a wide range of well-written texts. John McRae (1991) distinguishes between literature with a capital 'L' and literature with a small 'l'. Literature with a capital 'L' refers to classic canonical works by writers such as William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. On the other hand, literature with a small 'l' refers to popular fiction, fables and song lyrics. Both kinds of literature are creative works, and offer much potential for improving enjoyment, empathy, creativity and language improvement. In the following sections, I will first discuss the kinds of literature suitable for extensive reading, and then, various strategies for reading literature in the EFL classroom.

2. KINDS OF LITERATURE TO INTRODUCE FOR EXTENSIVE READING

It is important to select the right kinds of literature suitable for engaging students in extensive reading. In this section, I suggest encouraging students to read through contemporary Young Adult (YA) literature, multicultural literature and canonical Western literature.

Contemporary Young Adult Literature

YA literature is a relatively new genre. Before the 1990s, it was more typically associated with romance and growing up novels, but has since then, "come of age as literature – literature that welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking" (Cart, 2008). YA Literature is defined by Robert Carlson (in VanderStaay, 1992, p. 48) as literature where the protagonist is either a teenager or one who approaches problems from a teenage perspective. Such novels are generally of moderate length and told from first person. Typically, they describe initiation into the adult world, or the surmounting of a contemporary problem forced upon the protagonist(s) by the adult world. Though generally written for a teenage reader, such novels – like all fine literature – address the entire spectrum of life.

The *Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins is a striking example of a contemporary YA literature that has caught the attention of the public, especially because it has been adapted into a movie series. The dystopian series features a strong female protagonist, has an exciting plotline and deals with the larger themes of class and society, the role of the media, the role of power, and the power of sacrifice, among others. High quality YA series are appealing because readers can identify with the characters and story, and are encouraged to read more books by the same author. Moreover, series books also allow readers to build communities around their books as they read and talk about their reading (Jones, 2015). Reading a series around a particular topic can encourage students to read more of the same kinds of books. For example, students might be encouraged to read *The Maze Runner* series by James Dashner and other dystopian literature after reading *The Hunger Games.*Other than series books, students can be encouraged to read award-winning YA literature. *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness was awarded the CILIP Carnegie Medal in 2012. Jim Kay was also awarded the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal for his illustrations of the book.

> The monster showed up just after midnight. As they do.
> Conor was awake when it came.
> He'd had a nightmare. Well, not *a* nightmare. *The* nightmare. The one he'd been having a lot lately. The one with the darkness and the wind and the screaming. The one with the hands slipping from his grasp, no matter how hard he tried to hold on. The one that always ended with –
> "Go away," Conor whispered into the darkness of his bedroom, trying to push the nightmare back, not let it follow him into the world of waking. "Go away now."
>
> <div align="right">(Introduction from The Monster Calls)</div>

The introduction of *A Monster Calls* reads like a horror story, but as the story unravels, one learns that Conor, the protagonist, is learning to deal with his mother's impending death from cancer. The text is rich in description and literary symbolism, but holds the attention of the reader at the level of the story about a boy learning to deal with loss and death. For students who might find the novel too difficult to read on their own, read aloud can be employed as a strategy for students to appreciate and understand the story. Reading aloud is a useful strategy to expose students to different literary texts and tease them into reading the full novel. One teacher has shared about how she has read aloud *A Monster Calls* for her upper primary students. Her students enjoyed the book tremendously and looked forward to the daily read aloud sessions. Some students, unwilling to wait to find out what happened, borrowed the book and completed it on their own. Helping students to select good stories and rich literary texts can allow for deeper conversations around their readings.

Multicultural literature

Other than using YA literature, using multicultural literature is another way to encourage extensive reading in the EFL classroom. While there are various definitions of multicultural literature (see Cai, 1998 for a comprehensive discussion), I find Yokota's (1993) inclusive definition of multicultural literature as "Literature that represents any distinct cultural group through accurate portrayal and rich detail" most useful. In contrast to canonical Western literature with its dominantly white European-American male perspectives, multicultural literature exposes students to literature written from different parts of the world. Multicultural literature includes the literature that is distinct to one's own non-Anglophile culture, and can

provide a way for students to understand one's own culture and other cultures. In helping students to select multicultural literature for reading, it is important to remember to exposure students to books that are both international and local so that they have opportunities to understand diversity both globally and within the national context (Loh, 2009).

In Singapore, students enjoy reading novels that are set in Singapore or Asia. Books like *Sing to the Dawn* by Ho Minfong (about a Thai girl achieving her dreams of studying) and *Gone Case* by Dave Chua (about a adolescent boys' experience of growing up) are culturally relevant to students. Our teenage students identify with the adolescent protagonists and are able to relate to the issues that are set in more familiar Asian contexts. Ensuring that students have access to a wide selection of multicultural literature allows them to firstly, access their own worlds, and secondly, to expand their knowledge of other worlds. It is one way of expanding students' horizons of what they read (Said, 1993). In an increasingly globalized world, it is extremely important that we expose our students to literatures from all over the world. It is particularly vital for students in our interconnected Asian context to read each other's literature for greater understanding of our neighbours. As such, English teachers should curate and ensure that a wide selection of multicultural literature is available to their students for reading. Perhaps we can have conversations with EFL teachers in different Asian contexts to exchange suggestions for books to read to learn more about each culture.

Canonical Western Literature

The canonical western canon remains an important resource for EFL students. Reading is a way to pick up what Neuman and Celano (2012) has termed "information capital" , information that begets more learning. The culture of English literature is embedded in the language and stories of classic western canon, and it is through the reading of these texts that students can become familiar with the language and the culture embedded in the language. For example, biblical knowledge and Greek mythology are some of the common "information" that English students need to know to better access the English language. Knowing the story of Achilles and his pride helps students to understand the meaning of "Achilles' heel", which refers to a person's weak spot. Knowing the parable of the Good Samaritan in the New Testament of the Bible brings greater understanding to what it means when someone is referred to as "a good Samaritan", a person who would go out of his way to help someone in need. In *The Literary Mind*(Turner, 1998)*,* Mark Turner explains that humans understand best through stories. Stories also help us to understand others (Bruner, 2002), and can provide aids to remembering the meaning behind words.

One possible difficulty with reading canonical texts could be students' inability to grapple with the dense language. While I would encourage higher proficiency students to tackle the original texts for extensive reading, it is possible for teachers to introduce classics to students in the form of simpler prose adaptations and even graphic novels and comics. Students could be encouraged to begin with the adaptations to get a sense of the story, and then move on to reading the original texts as a challenge for themselves. Anthologies of Greek myths, Aesop's Fables, fairytales by Hans Christian Anderson and the Grimm Brothers are good selections. Students can also be encouraged to read around different versions of the same stories – for example, they can read different versions of *Red Riding Hood* or *Cinderella* in the form of fractured fairytales (see Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* for a humorous example or Neil Gaiman's retelling of *Hansel and Gretel* with more contemporary overtones) or fairytales set in different cultures, including their own. This would bring classic Anglophile stories into a more multicultural context, and allow students to see the common stories told across cultures. Students an also learn to understand that the different versions are told differently or result in different endings as a result of cultural differences. Through exposure to these different retellings, students learn to read critically and to see the world from different perspectives.

Strategies for Introducing Literature to EFL students

I have already mentioned in the earlier section some strategies for introducing literature to EFL students for extensive reading. Reading aloud is an important strategy for immersing students in the book, getting them interested in the story and scaffolding their learning. For weaker students, reading aloud

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provides a way for them to access the story before attempting it on their own. Listening to audiobooks or using e-books might be another way to harness technology to engage students in reading (Larson, 2015).

Extensive reading can also be complemented with intensive reading of literary texts. For example, a unit on fairytales can include in-class intensive reading of fairytales to understand the narrative structure, and complemented with a supplementary list of fairytales to be read for extensive reading. This way, students' in-class discussion can deepen their out-of-class readings and vice versa as they have a chance to be immersed in understanding the narrative structure and various fairytales. Another example: a unit on popular culture can include non-fiction and fiction texts, and students can be encouraged to read YA literature that deal with contemporary issues meaningful to them. Newberry winner Linda Sue Park's *A Long Walk to Water* is based on the true story of Salva Dut, a Sudanese lost boy, and the fictional story of Nya, a young village girl, and how their paths cross. Its issue of access to clean water is relevant to our students, and the themes of belonging, survival, and unity are important for understanding our world today. Students can be given a list of common books and tasked to read at least one of the books for extensive reading. Excerpts from these books can be used for intensive reading to further encourage students to read these books and to scaffold their understanding.

In addition, talking about books can generate greater interest in books and help students to understand the books and language better. Providing opportunities for students to discuss books read in the form of literary book clubs (Daniels, 2002) or even informal chat sessions allow students to share about the books read and cultivate a peer culture that supports reading. Through these opportunities to have conversations about books, it is hoped that the students can learn to "author rich literate selves" and "want the life of a reader and envision that for themselves" (Calkins, 2001, pp. 8-9).

Finally, it is vital that teachers themselves are wide readers (Cremin et al., 2014). Being familiar with literature will allow teachers to recommend the right books to students and enthuse them with their own reading. Teachers should ensure that the books recommended are available to students by checking that they are stocked in either the class or school library. Access to a wide variety of good literature is important to encourage students pick up books of their own accord and to read for pleasure (Loh, 2015).

3. CONCLUSION

Encouraging the reading of literary texts in extensive reading allow students to immerse themselves in enjoying a text, learning empathy, cultivating creativity and contributing to language improvement. Students should be encouraged to read both literature with a capital "L" and with a small "l" in the form of YA literature, multicultural literature and western classics. By ensuring student access to rich literary texts, teachers can cultivate students' acquisition and appreciation of English. Through such extensive reading, students can also widen their view of the world and of language, thus learning to read both the world and the word (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

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