

READING: A MOTIVATING AND INTERACTIVE PROCESS

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This research was primarily intended for those who are professionally concerned with the teaching of a foreign language, and especially for those who consider reading to be one of the most important sources for developing comprehension and production processes. We wanted our students to develop reading strategies by means of meaningful and motivating stories. Meaningful, because interesting stories encourage them to improve, and motivating, because they open the doors to multiple possibilities, thereby reinforcing other abilities.

Introduction

The subjects were teenage girls from the Liceo Antonia Santos state school, most of whom live in the south part of Bogotá. They belong to a mid-low economic and cultural level and were in tenth grade. There were about 35 students in each class. They had three periods of English a week and their training in reading comprehension was poor.

Data interpretation described their reading preferences, texts, activities and ways of working. Results suggested that students preferred to work in groups and read fairy tales, short stories, novels and horror stories as literary work. They asked for interpretation by drawing as a pre-reading activity and were not keen on predictions. Vocabulary

identification was very important for them throughout the whole reading activity. Students suggested word searches, drawing, dramatisation and word games like crosswords and puzzles. And as post-reading activities, they preferred dramatising; they were not keen on developing guides, drawing pictures or summarising.

It should be mentioned that some theoretical issues supported our research. First, we considered reading comprehension as the process through which the reader constructs the meaning of a text by interpreting textual information in light of prior knowledge and experience. Learning a language through reading is not a matter of distinguishing letters and shapes, drawing those shapes, following a text with the eyes and so on; learning to read grows from a deeper layer of conceptual development and its success depends on careful selection of the type of text, reading strategies and motivation. We also took into consideration the cyclical process which explains the elements that interact in the reading process (visual input, perception, syntax and semantics, etc.). Attention was also given to reading strategies. These are defined as conscious mental processes which depend on who is using them, with what text, at what point in the text, under what circumstances and with what purpose in mind. A fourth aspect we considered in our theoretical framework was that

corresponding to the categories of reading activities. They are a list of common possible activities to do in class. Finally, we examined the ideal reader characteristics, which explain the two different processes used by readers: bottom-up and top-down.

Procedure and results

Taking into account the points above, we prepared three workshops using simple readings, each one of them designed to be carried out in 70 minutes. In each workshop the students and the teacher wrote diaries which helped in the analysis of the activities and gave positive points of view, advice and feedback. The activities demonstrated that short and meaningful readings promote interaction, motivation and oral and written production. Each workshop showed the importance of different aspects. First, team work, which is really relevant, since it gives students opportunities to interact, so improving oral and written skills. Second, motivation which is the element that has to be present throughout the entire lesson. If motivation decreased, students' interaction decreased and good behaviour declined. Motivation is extremely important in that it enables the students to learn easily and rapidly – so much that they were conscious of their learning and demanded higher quality classes. Third, vocabulary: if students did not understand the meaningful words they felt lost and their interest decreased. The teacher had to carry realia, lots of pictures and visual aids to explain the vocabulary. Vocabulary is not a matter of the lesson presentation, but to be worked on

throughout the class. Finally, during our experience with this group of students we discovered that they expressed themselves orally better and without inhibition if they wrote their ideas first; this proves that reading is not an isolated skill. For better results in language learning, reading skills have to be worked on in an integrated way, with listening, speaking and writing. This ensures that the learner uses all his/her capacities.

Although the results were very clear, this research left us some questions that could develop into further research; for example, how to use literature such as poetry in teaching English?, or how to work on writing before speaking in a lesson?

Conclusion

Now that we have finished the research, we are convinced that reading is a complex but useful process that provides great opportunities for interaction and learning whenever other skills are integrated into such process. It would be a waste of time to work on reading in isolation.

Working on reading as a source for teaching is not as easy as it seems. Working on reading in the classroom implies that the teacher has to know his/her students very well in order to select the topic to work on and know how to make a diagnosis of their preferences and select the most appropriate for the case. We cannot say that the activities we worked on here are the best and are applicable for all kinds of students. If the diagnosis was done at a male or coed school, the results could vary.