READING CAN BE FUN AND AN ACTIVE ACTIVITY: A CASE OF UNIOESTE EFL STUDENTS

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Resume: This article discusses the active role of reading form an analysis of a group of university students. A profile resulted from this investigation pointing out students’ likes and dislikes, their habits and suggestions for interesting classes. The results suggest that pre-reading and post-reading activities involving some type of physical expressing should be introduced in the classes.

Key-words: Reading, multiple intelligences, foreign classes.

1. Introduction

1.1 Passive reading X active students

Even to the experienced language teacher, the reading skill in a foreign language class usually involves a certain concern. At first, reading requires degrees of concentration, relaxation and, to a certain extent, a steady position. To start with a discussion about reading, these three requirements presented above do not exactly fit the behavior students of elementary and high school are mostly willing to exercise, mostly due to the developmental stages they are passing through, involving physical and psychological changes. In other words, children, as well as adolescents, want to be actively playing and interacting most part of the time. Therefore, apparently there is a mismatch between the reading skill and the student in the classroom.

Consequently, some teachers may give up and decide to dedicate to speaking, writing or listening instead. From this view of reading, much discouragement was spread towards reading.

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Fortunately, several studies have showed that a lot more can be done in a reading activity, if the teacher has in mind a concept that views reading as an active process. In order to give some supportive evidences to this second view of reading, this study has two basic aims: 1) to verify the elements that make the language class interesting to a group of undergraduate students, who, similarly to children and adolescents, also demand an active reading class, and 2) to propose activities that make reading more interesting to these students. An experiment was carried out with a group of 19 undergraduate Brazilian students, who answered a questionnaire. This study, which consists of a cross-sectional study, analyzed the data collected and concluded that the reading activity can be improved provided that both teachers and students adopt new behaviors towards this skill.

1.2 Views of reading

During a long time, reading was understood as a passive or receptive process, and to the language classroom a passive skill along with the listening skill. According to Nutthall (1996), there was an assumption that the text was waiting to be absorbed. Also, Williams (1992) says that it was believed that the reader was fed with letters, words and sentences and that reading was a 'all or nothing' process.

Nuthall (op.cit.) presents the analysis of a former conception about the process of communication, in which there was a belief that the process was simple as: the sender encodes a message in a text which is in turn decoded by the receiver. She also presents an illustration of the reader who would soak the water, the text, of a jug. Both processes presented by the authors address to the reader a passive role. That is to say, they do not consider the possibilities of accepting or rejecting the text, transforming it or taking into account that not all the meaning of a text may be understood, and that writer and reader may be sharing different codes and different backgrounds.

Furthermore, Smith (1982) pointed out two other elements that are present in the reading process, that are the visual and non-visual information involved. In other words, readers need the printed words on the page, the understanding of the relevant language, the familiarity with the subject matter and the general ability to read. Besides, there is in fact the belief that in order for the communication process
to occur it is necessary to have shared assumptions between the writer and the reader. These assumptions, which are derived from our experiences of the world, are organized in mental structures defined by Rumelhardt (1980) as schemata. From the understanding about the concept of schemata we can understand how we are able to interpret texts.

1.3 Action in reading

Speakers can use gestures, facial expressions, make interruptions, ask for clarification, deny or reinforce an idea while having a conversation. We can visualize that there is action involved in this face-to-face interaction. It took some time for people to understand that there is also action involved in reading although one can not so easily visualize this interaction while observing a reader.

Smith (1982) and Goodman (1970) pointed out that readers are making predictions while reading a text. Readers, as Goodman (op.cit.) claims, select elements to answer their guesses about the text, based on the redundancy and constraints of the language. Consequently, there is an interaction between thought and language. Nuttall (1996) presents a figure to explain the virtuous circle of the weak and the good reader. As it is presented below:

![Figure 1. Weak reader](image-url)
From the figures above, we can have some more evidences that reading is not related to a slowing down process. The arrows express this dynamic process in which a static process does not motivate students to read.

However one has to have in mind that the active role is not the teacher’s. For example, sometimes teachers read texts aloud, translate them, explain problems students might find in texts. In these situations the teacher is doing what the reader has to do for him/herself. So taking the active role in reading means, as Nuttall (1996) puts it, the first responsibility is to be active and take charge of what students do.

2. METHODOLOGY

Having in mind the theory just presented, this study proposed to investigate the elements that make the language class interesting and activities that can make the reading activity more interesting, based on the view of reading as an active process (Nuttall, 1996; Goodman, 1976; Williams, 1992) and complemented by the theories of multiple intelligences (Fletcher, 2000). A group of 19 Brazilian University students answered a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of six questions inquiring about reading, including likes and dislikes, habits, and suggestions for interesting reading classes. This was a cross-sectional study.
3. Results and discussion

From the data collected, it was possible to observe that students like reading, read frequently, the subject of the text is the element that motivates them the most, and they also stated that reading followed by pair work seems to be more interesting. The percentages presented below show the students’ responses in the questionnaire regarding reading.

Concerning the first question, *do you like reading*, 42,1% of the students said that they like reading *very much* and 36,9% of them said that they *like reading*. 5,25% of the students said that they sometimes like reading, 10,5% said they do not like reading *very much* and 5,25% said that they do not reading. According to these numbers, we can observe that more than 70% of the students have a positive attitude towards reading.

To what regards the second question, *how frequently do you read*, the students said that *they read everyday*, 42,1%. 15,79% of the students said that do not frequently read and 5,26% of them said they read whenever they have time. 21,05% of the students say that they read once a week or rarely. 5,26% of the students say that they read from two to three hours a week. 10,53% of the students said that they read before class in order to get ready to them, checking previous lessons. We can interpret that frequency in reading is not a predominant characteristic to the group interviewed.

In relation to the third question, *what makes reading interesting*, 38,89% of the students said that the topic of the subject was the element that makes reading interesting. Also 22,22% of the students said that clear and concise texts turn the students interests. 16,75 of the students said that funny and mysterious stories are interesting. 11,12% of the students said that news turn the text to be interesting. A students said “a text becomes monotonous if it is repetitive.” 5,55% of the students said that texts that report to real life situations are interesting.5,55% of the students said that *bigger letters* make reading more interesting because it is not as tiresome as small letters. A student stated that long texts do not encourage reading. Another students said that reading is interesting when it is fun and helps the reader to forget about personal problems. The responses to this question show that topic, predominantly, language and genre play an important role to reading. To a shorter
number of students, but interesting enough, the size of letters and the length of the
texts were pointed out as face threatening.

Students answered what *topics do you like reading* in the fourth
question. The table below shows these numbers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>17.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>11.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Films</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Songs</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-help</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>7.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fashion, beauty, drama, psychology, internet, poems</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>4.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>3.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>1.05%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Favorite topics for reading

As it can be observed from the table above, students' preferences have a
range of topics, but having news as the most popular among students with 17.89%.
Arts and geography revealed to be the least interesting topics.

Question number 5 asked about the kind of activities that most motivate
students. From their answers 19.15% of the students like reading followed by pair
work, and 17.02% of the students said after reading they like to do group work. Also
17.02% of the students said reading and role-playing is motivating. 14.89% of the
students stated that having a written interpretation exercise after reading a text is
motivating. In addition, 12.76% of the students like working individually after reading,
10.64% of the students like to have some oral activity after reading a text and 8.52%
of the students like expressing graphically (drawing, for example) after reading a text.
Therefore, analyzing the percentages above we can say that the numbers do not
point to extreme positions, students are divided in the type of activities they like,
expressing some preference in reading, working in pair and role-playing.
In the last question, question 6, students were asked about how they would describe an interesting reading class. 27.78% of the students said that reading and discussing about the text is interesting. Also 27.78% of the students answered that they like to put into practice what they have learned by drawing, role-playing, making graphics. 11.11% of the students said that 11.11% of the students said that reading can be more interesting if the students get more involved, 11.11% of them said they would like to read texts that point out opinions about their occupation and 11.11% of the students did not give any suggestion. Interesting enough, a student points out that an interesting reading activity may also be influenced by the mood of the reader. Another fact a student brings into discussion is that reading is an activity which requires quiet places in order to reflect about what is being read. According to this student, it is hard to get concentrated for reading in noisy places. From these questions a lot more was expected, but students did not contributed much to clarify about their preferences. The answers in this question somehow reflect the answers from the previous question.

4. Conclusion

Some interesting issues can be discussed considering the data just presented. A first aspect to be highlighted is that this group of students mostly like reading and frequently spend some time in reading. This characteristic encourages the researcher to continue this project in the search for improvements in the reading activity. Another aspect revealed by the students was that the kind of topic and a clear and concise text are the great responsible aspects to make reading interesting. The topic also, according to the group, has to be about some new topic and it is also evident the interference of the foreign language which can make reading more difficult, because according to the students the text has to be clear and concise. Furthermore, students seem to prefer reading and discussing, and reading and putting the ideas in practice by drawing or role-playing.

The profile, which resulted from this survey, can help the teacher who can adapt a series of activities trying to fulfill students’ expectations. More action can be introduced in a reading class if the teacher includes activities, which involve the use of the multiple intelligence, as proposed by Gardner and Fletcher. The authors
suggest that teachers can develop eight types of intelligence in our classes. The kinesthetic is the intelligence that fits the proposal of this study, because requires the body to express emotion and it is adequate for people who find it hard to sit still. Therefore, this study wants to suggest that reading activities can have pre-reading or post-reading activities involving some type of physical expressing. According to Fletcher (1996), activities accompanied by role-playing or singing songs favors learning because it activates mental activity, suitable, we may say, for restless students.

5. BIBLIOGRAPHY


