The Roles of Reading Texts on Student's Reading Engagement

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Abstract

Motivation plays a critical role in raising students' reading proficiency. Motivation to read has been defined as the individual's personal goal, values and beliefs with regard to the topics, process, and outcomes of reading. Many researches have been conducted on reading motivation in order to find ways developing learners' language acquisitions. With the same purpose, this paper explores the role of reading texts on EFL/ESL learners' reading motivation on the basis of previous researches in this field. It also promotes using appropriated reading texts for reading comprehension programs (intensively and extensively). The paper clarifies some definitions of key concepts of reading comprehension, and emphasizes the importance of the development and maintenance of motivation to read. It highlights the roles of reading texts on learners' reading competence and motivation to read and provides the criteria that can be used to select an appropriate reading text for reading classrooms.

Keywords — *reading motivation, reading texts, reading comprehension*

I. INTRODUCTION

Larson (2009) mentioned that reading is a lifelong skill that students must master to become critical, engaged readers and thinkers in both school and life. Rosenblatt's (1994) reader response theory emphasizes the importance of the reader in making meaning from a text in which readers breathe life into texts through their prior knowledge and personal experiences. According to Larson (2009), good reading texts provide good models for writing and provide opportunities to introduce new topics, to stimulate discussion and to study language. In order to benefit most from reading texts and become engaged, thoughtful and critical readers, students need opportunities to think critically and thoughtfully on their own terms without first being affected by the thoughts of others. However, a large number of ESL learners have certain difficulties with English reading which might affect their attitudes towards reading in English (Mede, 2010).

In Vietnam, English reading skill has been found to be challenging for Vietnamese students as well. Hang (2009) found that Vietnamese learners experienced considerable difficulties with reading as they found

Vietnamese learners have not developed reading skills as such as using context clues or locating main ideas. She believes that there are some reasons explaining students' English reading weaknesses. Many students complained that they have had difficulty in reading English texts because they lack vocabulary to understand the text. More importantly, students lack motivation in reading classes. Students are observed to show their little or no interest in reading activities. They are found sleeping, making noises or sitting silently in the classes. Most students rarely volunteer to perform in front of the class. In addition, a large number of reading texts overwhelms them. Consequently, students seem to lack interests in exploring information or they are demotivated to read in English. From teaching experiences of the researcher and other teachers of English, a lack of motivation is believed to be a very important factor that causes Vietnamese students of English difficulties in reading (Hang, 2009).

The aim of this article is first to describe what reading motivation primarily is and then to look at how a reading text helps improve students' reading motivation..

II. THE CONCEPTS OF READING AS THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE READERS AND THE TEXTS

To describe reading as the process of the reader's interaction with texts is common practice in both literary theory and psychology of reading (Wooddruff & Griffin, 2017). From a psycholinguistic viewpoint, reading is a problem-solving behaviour in which the readers are actively involved in the process of acquiring and allocating meaning (Papalia, 1987). During the process, "the reader is drawing on contextual information that contains syntactic, semantic and discourse constrains that affect interpretation" (Papalia, 1987, p.70). In other words, reading is an active and complex process that involves understanding written text, developing and interpreting meaning and using meaning as appropriate to type of text, purpose, and situation (Valencia, Wixson, Ackerman, & Sanders, 2017).

According to Freire (1983), reading is an activity which is guided by the text and is processed by the reader who is then affected by what he has processed. Freire (1983) also emphasizes the role of readers' background knowledge in the process of interacting

with the text by stating that "in order to understand literary texts readers must be able to use their extra-textual knowledge from daily life to recognize similar presentations of situations in literary texts." (p. 8). The way in which readers use extra-literary knowledge and experience in their interaction with texts to build around them a 'scenario, a text world, a set of states of affairs, in which that text makes sense' (Freire, 1983, p. 9) contribute to their understanding.

It is obvious that during the interaction with the text, the readers have to build around the text a textual world in which the text makes sense and becomes interpretable. According to Alderson (2000), the knowledge of the world refers to every particular person's world which differs from others for the reason that every individual has unique personal history, feelings, ideas, interests and experiences which are not necessarily experienced or processed by others. Kramsch (as cited in Davoudi & Ramezani, 2014) believes that understanding a language includes understanding a culture within which it is used; in other words, since culture affects all aspects of life, it certainly has a major impact on all elements of reading; therefore, learners can grasp a new language only when they have a probable understanding of the cultural context of that language. As a result, a reader is most likely to fail to understand a text if his/her cultural knowledge is different from the one proposed by the text.

III. WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT MOTIVATION TO READ?

All paragraphs must be indented. All Why is it so important for teachers to consider the role of motivation in literacy learning? According to Gambrell (2011), interest in reading envisions students' reading comprehension; that is, students who enjoy reading the most perform significantly better than students who enjoy reading the least. She emphasizes that teaching practice that provides students with decoding and comprehension skills and strategies is insufficient. If students are not motivated to read, they will never reach their full literacy potential.

Motivation to read can be defined as the probability of engaging in reading or choosing to read (Gambrell, 2009). Wigfield and Guthrie (2000) defined reading motivation "the individual's personal goal, values and beliefs with regard to the topics, process, and outcomes of reading" (p. 405). As it has been found to be one of the factors that affect the reading ability, Wang and Guthrie (2004) found that motivated readers choose to engage in reading activities more frequently than those with low motivation. With the increase in reading practice, the learners in the study improved their comprehension ability.

Students need to have motivation and become engaged with learning activities in order to achieve success in reading and writing. Without reading motivation, students will benefit less from learning reading (Brozo & Flynt, 2008). In other words, lack of motivation will push students away from literacy competence and build up a learning resistance. Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes (2007) indicated that students would not highly engage with writing and reading activities if the topic does not convey something important to their daily communication; or it is not of their interests; or the students do not have enough reason to participate. Therefore, before designing reading and writing activities and assignments in the classroom, teachers need to understand the diversity, competency and the insights in the out-of-school literacy experiences of students (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Smith & Wilhelm, 2004). It is necessary for teachers to bear in mind the connection between the classroom activities with students' daily lives outside schools. In doing so, teachers have motivated students in engaging with literacy learning.

IV. THE TEXT: FACTORS INFLUENCING READING MOTIVATION

Instead of looking at a myriad of factors that can affect student motivation within the school context, Renandya (2015) focused on classroom specific factors that teachers are most familiar with and which they can make the most impacts on, for instance, the classroom environment, our behavior and actions in the classroom, our relationship with the students, the way we teach in class, and how we structure our lessons, and the way we assess our students. These classroom specific factors are referred to as the 5 Ts of motivation as shown in Figure 1 below:
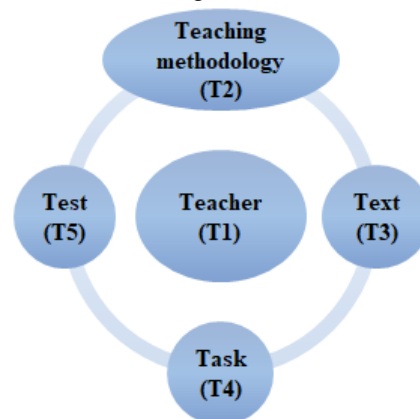

Figure 1: The 5 Ts of Motivation (Adapted from Renandya, 2015, p.181)

This study finds way to explore more deeply the role of the Text as one factor that contributes to student's reading intrinsic motivation since sources of intrinsic motivation include positive reading experiences, books regarded as pleasurable, realizing the personal importance of reading, and interest in the topic read (Becker, McElvany & Kortenbruck, 2010).

The affective dimension of course materials is particularly important in language learning. ELT

materials development experts such as Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) contend that "materials should engage the emotions of the learner. Laughter, joy, excitement, sorrow and anger can promote learning; neutrality cannot" (p. 6). This type of materials allows learners to process the contents and language of the materials at a much deeper level, resulting in the kind of learning that is durable and long lasting. If the reading material is interesting and relevant to the students, it will motivate them to read more. Reading materials should have suitable contents, which means that the suitable texts will tell students things they do not know, introduce to them new and relevant ideas and suit their reading levels. Secondly, reading material's language items such as vocabulary and grammatical structures may have impacts on students' motivation. Through the texts, students can understand the way the others feel or think and make them read for themselves.

Selecting relevant and interesting material for readers is a key to their engagement in the process (Abraham, 2001) because using irrelevant and uninteresting teaching materials make learners face difficulties in learning a foreign language. It cannot be denied that reading texts plays a crucial role in teaching and learning reading because through them, new grammar, phonetic and lexical items of the target language is introduced. Furthermore, texts are also meant to help students enrich their background knowledge and vocabulary as well. In reading lessons, students are supposed to understand the texts correctly as much as possible, learn some new language items, e.g. words, structures, and use what they have got from the texts through reading tasks and communication activities that follow.

For teachers to support students effectively they need to take note of an individual's goals as well as the goals set by their communities and of the tools available to students including the texts they encounter in educational settings. Engaged readers are intrinsically motivated to read for a variety of personal goals, strategic in their reading behaviors, knowledgeable in their construction of new understandings from text, and socially interactive about the reading of text. Therefore, promoting intrinsic motivation to read should be given a high priority in the reading curriculum.

V. PROBLEMS IN TEXT SELECTION

Many researchers while studying this field find the problem in text selection (e.g., Ebe, 2010) in which texts that are used to assess the reading proficiency of EFL/ESL learners are not culturally relevant for the students who read them. Often a writer will assume that the target reader has the relevant background knowledge to read and make meanings out of the text; therefore, the writer will leave certain facts out or unstated. However, this creates problems when the writer and readers do not share the same relevant background knowledge (Berardo, 2006). This problem

is found in many nations where ESL/EFL holds an important place in education. One example takes place in Taiwan, where most English texts that Taiwanese students read are narrative or expository passages. In addition, for most students, the purpose for reading those passages is to help them to learn new words and syntactic rules so that they can get better grades for some exams; thus, many students cannot interact with the context and they cannot learn the whole picture of the reading passages (Weng, 2012).

The same situation happens in China where reading courses are intended to develop general reading skills, the ability to read quickly and an ability to grasp main meaning, in which the reading texts are considered far of students' interests. As a result, many students cope with distasteful job assignments in which little knowledge of English is actually required, and quickly lose their interest in English (Stuart, 1990). Another example was presented in the research conducted by Ebe (2010) who told her story in New York where her students, who came from the flat deserts of Northern Mexico, had to struggle to read texts about children climbing mountains and finding caves with waterfalls. She also referred to another familiar situation of her college in Hong Kong where the students had difficulties in reading the texts not only because they are not proficient in English, but also because they lack background knowledge to get connected to the reading texts.

Therefore, in teaching reading, the teacher should pay much attention to the following aspects such as language content, vocabulary and grammatical structures, types of reading activities; though it is not a simple thing to do, as Tomlinson (2012) stated, to provide an appropriate reading text is not easy because it takes a large amount of time, effort and knowledge. Also, he states that if teaching materials are not interesting and motivating, learners will learn nothing. In other words, students' needs, interest, motivations and reading level are all important considerations in selecting the instructional materials. The teacher, therefore, has to consider firstly whether the materials selected match with their students' levels, needs, interest and motivation. When classroom teachers provided students with easy access to a wide range of interesting texts, the effects on comprehension and motivation to read were enormous, hence, learners would be more motivated to succeed in learning any language (Wan-a-rom, 2012). Especially, when readers are familiar with reading materials, they can use their own knowledge and experience to understand the written texts.

VI. DEVELOPING CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING APPROPRIATE TEXTS FOR TEACHING READING

Clay (1991) states the difficulty of any given text must be seen to vary for individual students, depending not only on their skills but their understandings about the cultural context and the

situation in which they encounter the text. Clay asserts that the difficulties in a text are always defined by the individual reader and that skilled teachers can develop an understanding of what constitutes an appropriate text for students learning to read.

Acevedo and Rose (2007) acknowledge that students who are experiencing difficulty with literacy are not engaged with schooling, or reading, and are at risk of educational failure. They have recognized the importance of background knowledge when a reader is addressing a text. However, they do not focus on the possibility of particular texts being more or less engaging or supportive of the reading process.

Students get more motivation to read when the reading texts are relevant to their lives (Gambrell, 2011); that is, to enhance reading motivation and achievement, students need help to identify value and meaning in reading texts and the reading itself. When students find connections between the material they are reading and their lives, they become more involved and engaged in comprehending the text (Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000). In other words, motivation is enriched when reading practices focus on connections between school reading and the personal lives of students (Gambrell, 2011); that is, students who found the material they were reading relevant to their lives showed more motivation and interest than students who did not.

According to Renandya (2015), since the text is given the important role of instructional materials in the language learning process, it is essential that the materials we use are interesting and motivating. Renandya (2015) shows that "not much learning can occur if the materials are linguistically, cognitively and affectively unappealing to the learners" (p.184). The following list of questions can be used to gauge the interest level of the instructional materials we use (Renandya, 2015, p.185):

- "*Are the materials pitched at the right linguistic levels, not too easy and not too demanding?*

- *Do the materials contain language items that attract students' attention?*

- *Are the contents appropriate for the students you are teaching?*

- *Do the materials help the learners make personally meaningful connections with their own lives?*

- *Do the materials help the learners make connections with the lives of the people in their surrounding?*

- *Do the materials provide positive learning experiences and promote students' self-esteem and self-confidence?*

- *Do the materials provide ample opportunity for students to learn what they really need or want to learn?*

- *Are the materials emotionally stimulating and engaging?"*

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, choosing appropriate texts for teaching reading must be based on an understanding of the learner's needs as defined by the difficulty of the text as well as the level of engagement the text produces. The difficulty level of the text must not focus only on the learner's skills as a decoder but must include the relationship of the reader's community to the school, and what it means for the individual student learning to read. The choice of texts must above all engage readers as poor and unmotivated readers spend less and less time reading. If the teaching of reading is recognized as a sociocultural practice, it is clear that the culture and social practices of the student's community are important factors in the process of learning to read. Therefore, texts which reflect the social and linguistic resources of the local school community can provide important support to a young reader as it is this way of learning and knowing which will be most familiar to students.

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