

How Do Students Feel about Graded Readers?

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Abstract

EFL/ESL specialists agree on the contribution of extensive reading to the language learning process, and graded readers have been highly recommended for the use of beginning learners. The study discussed in this article was conducted to see how students felt about graded readers after having been required to read a minimum number of titles. The qualitative study was based on interviews of Turkish university preparatory students, and brought to light significant concerns about the employment of graded readers. While some participants did support the recommendation that reading graded readers helped them make linguistic gains, conflicting opinions arose when they were asked to comment on whether reading graded readers had increased their appreciation of literature and whether the practice had encouraged extensive reading of literary works.

Introduction

We wished to learn about preparatory school students' evaluation of whether and how required reading of graded readers had influenced their appreciation of literature and if it promoted the desire to make extensive reading a habit. The research was undertaken at a private preparatory school in Istanbul, Turkey, where 44 students were interviewed during the final segment of a one-year English study program. The program consisted of five modules in each of which the students were asked to read and report on six graded readers. While it was found that not all students had complied with this requirement, some had excelled and had read as many as 50 readers. The results of the research that we focus on in this article deal with the responses to the interview questions as to the number of graded readers the student had actually read, if he or she could remember the titles of any of them, and what their opinion was as to whether the practice had encouraged extensive reading and/or increased their appreciation of literature. Our intention was to use the students' observations and the insights gained in advancing our own teaching methodology. The results were surprising, and we hope that sharing our interpretations of the data collected will advance the understanding of students' needs and expectations in the promotion of extensive reading and incite further research into the issue.

Background

Graded readers are books usually based on classic literature in which the language level has been simplified. The use of graded readers in language teaching has been shown in research to promote faster learning of the language (TE Editor 2011), and while we wished to use them to this end in our program, we also had the goal of encouraging students to form the habit of extensive reading, as "there is no shortage of evidence that extensive reading contributes to successful language learning." (Macalister 2010:60) The idea of extensive reading in the context of language teaching and learning "means reading lots of easy, enjoyable books" (ibid.:62), and the purpose of graded readers of is "to provide text for extensive reading" (Hill 2008:186), so we therefore made reading graded readers a fundamental factor in our program. We undertook the present research in order to learn about the students' responses to this experience in the hope of bringing further understanding to the field, because "there is, unfortunately, no consensus among the (E)LT profession as to what extensive reading is, how it contributes to the process of learning a language, or how it should be promoted in the classroom." (ibid.) We subscribe to the concept of a cognitive approach in teaching, wherein "people are regarded as active beings that choose to engage in a task consciously" (Icmez 2009:125). One of the primary challenges of such an approach in teaching is to get the students to view *themselves* from such a perspective.

We had made reading a requirement in the hope that by complying with it the students would engage consciously in the task and come to both enjoy and value the practice. Such compliance is taking responsibility for learning, and transmitting the understanding of this is, as Kramsch (1993:6) has indicated, “the fundamental paradox of education”. We knew that very few of the students engaged in reading by their own volition, and therefore felt that requiring them to read might introduce them to the pleasure of this activity, and that this in turn would stimulate them to read because they chose to. The concept behind this teaching is was described by Noam Chomsky (1996:135): “As any good teacher knows, the methods of instruction and the range of material covered are matters of small importance as compared with the success in arousing the natural curiosity of the students and stimulating their interest in exploring on their own.”

In the case of working with reading, we took what the British Council calls an ‘extensive reading approach’, the main objective of which is “to get students reading in English and liking it.” In such an approach, students “are allowed to choose the books they read depending on their interests...” (TE Editor 2005), therefore, even though reading graded readers was required, the students were free to choose the types of stories that interested them. With these concepts in mind, our anticipations were that by beginning with graded readers the students would discover the delight of reading, that their curiosity about literature would be aroused, and, on another level, that their learning of the English language would also advance. In order to learn whether these anticipations had been realized we interviewed students who had taken part in the program, both those who had complied with the requirement and those who had not, to learn about their evaluation of the experience. In the following we describe the research and discuss our findings.

About the research

The participants in the research were 44 Turkish preparatory students, 18 males and 26 females, aged 19 to 21. A requirement to enter the university was one year of the study of English at the Preparatory school in a program consisting of 5 different modules: A1 (beginner), A2 (pre-intermediate), B1 (intermediate), B2 (high intermediate), and C1 (advanced). They were all prospective students of different faculties and departments at the university whose medium of language is English. In each module of the English program the students were asked to read and report on six graded readers. 120 graded readers were made available to the students, the majority of which were publications from Oxford University Press, Pearson-Longman, Penguin Publishing, and Cambridge University Press. The participants volunteered to take part in the study, which consisted of in-depth qualitative interviews from which data was collected. Permission was granted from the school management so that students could be interviewed during regular class hours. The interviews, which were of approximately 30 minutes ranged over an eight week period, were audio-taped and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in the students’ native language and the transcriptions translated into English. Seven questions were asked, the first four of which will be discussed below. These are: 1) How many graded readers have you read so far in the preparatory school?; 2) Do you remember the titles of the graded readers you have read thus far?; 3) Do you think that reading graded readers has increased your appreciation of classics and literature?; 4) Do you plan to continue reading literary works in the future? The process of our data analysis was based on Miles and Huberman’s (1994) pattern coding scheme.

Findings and Discussion

In the analysis of the question about how many graded readers the participants had read it was found that while not all students had complied with the reading requirements, some had excelled. The average number of graded readers the participants said they had read was 20 over the course of the first four modules in the program, with the minimum number being ten and the maximum 50. Responses from participants who reported reading these numbers of graded readers also included their reasons for their accomplishment, or its limitation:

B.A. Unfortunately, to tell the truth I read only 10 titles. It’s because I was a non-reader in my first language. Then I had to read in a second language... You cannot imagine how tough this is for person who does not like reading books. Particularly, looking up the meanings of unknown words from a dictionary is really a torture. Despite this, as a result of hard-work, I accomplished reading some titles which I think I will never forget...

F.S. Well, I guess I read more or less 20 titles... At the beginning it was rather difficult because I was not an enthusiastic reader even in my native language. Frankly speaking, reading English was really a challenge for me...

Despite the linguistic difficulty I really enjoyed reading [several books listed]... I do not remember the names of the other books I have read... I guess it is because I did not find them interesting...

H.U. I read a total of 50 copies. I was told that reading graded would contribute to my English language proficiency, which really motivated me a lot... Even though I encountered difficulties ...for example unknown words, the movies I watched on the TV helped me a lot to understand the stories. For me they were like puzzles to be solved, therefore, I loved reading them...

Both participants quoted above who had not managed to fulfill the course requirements by having read 24 graded readers mentioned that they were not readers in their L1, which in the data collected was a frequently repeated reason for reluctance to engage in L2 reading. Other participants noted that while the required reading of graded readers had increased their interest in literature and promoted the desire for extensive reading, it would be in their L1, as these commentaries show:

S.Y. For sure I will continue with reading classics. My experience with graded readers in prep school developed in me a desire to read classics. However, most probably I will read them in my first language. I do not want to miss anything in the story because of the second language barrier...

T.T. I really enjoyed reading classics in the second language. It gives me two pleasures at the same time; what I mean is learning English by reading the most popular literary classics....It's not an exaggeration to say that these simplified readers have increased my love for reading literary works. For example, I was deeply shocked and influenced by Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*... I was so much charmed by the story that I later read the Turkish version of the book.

There was at least one participant, however, who admitted to already being a reader, but had come to recognize the value of reading in the original language:

M.E. I was already reading novels in Turkish ...But now I am quite happy to know that in the future I can read classics in English. I am told that some emotions and experience are lost during translations. Thus, I am looking for the time when I can read classics in their original language...

31 of the 44 participants mentioned various ways in which reading graded readers had helped them. Several, even one who said that it had not contributed to her or his interest in literature (cited below), observed that the reading had been good practice for learning English, as did this person.:

H.S. I am really happy that we are required to read books in English for every module. I know that they are difficult for me as well as for others. However, I have realized that the benefit is great in the long run... I have practiced and learnt new vocabulary, grammar structures, idioms, and so on... The amazing fact is I have not only learnt English language but also read works of great writers. For example, when I read about *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, I was able to picture every sentence in my mind, because long ago I watched the movie...

Another seemed to have enjoyed the experience of learning about literature:

J.N. I began to read them in the beginning because of obligation...a part of the program assignment and module evaluation. Therefore, speaking honestly, I considered them a kind of burden... As person with a hardworking character, I decided to overcome this burden and started reading books from the list.... Once I was able to decipher the plot in the story... I received more and more pleasure from reading... Even though they were simple versions of classics, it was a lot fun to learn about them. Can you imagine? I have now an idea of many western classics and what they are about... I can talk and comment on some of them... It was a wonderful experience. The remark here about being "able to decipher the plot" is related to those in two citations above about watching the movie based on the book in order to understand the story. This may indicate an erroneous concept of the act of reading in general and the resultant need for preliminary discussions about the process of reading. In spite these affirmative responses with regard to required reading, there were participants who averred that their interest in literature had not been augmented by the practice of reading of graded readers. During the interviews two of whom put this succinctly:

C.S. Instead of reading literary works I plan to read newspapers and watch TV. I find them more interesting. They are more related to actual life. You see I do not want to spent time on fiction....

H. K. Well, I think that after prep school, I want to read academic books. I want to specialize in my subject. Therefore, the more I read about my subject, the more professional I become. I am aware that time is valuable, thus, I want to use it in accordance with my needs...

It was found that 17 of the 44 participants did not feel that the requirement of reading graded readers was of any benefit at all. Some of these participants' responses were:

T.K. I never looked at the stories I was reading from a literary point of view...I read them because they were compulsory... Thus, they did not make me like or appreciate literature...

E.A. As for me they were like homework. We were obliged to read them. I guess because of my dislike for homework, I did not enjoy reading those stories no matter whether or not they are classics....

D.Z. So far, no motive or force could make me read literary books. Accordingly, the reading requirement in prep school prevented me from reading. I am different from others. I like to read when I want to read. I do not like doing things other people want me to do...in particular reading...

A common point in these responses that is made especially clear in the final one is that because the reading had been a requirement it had not been an enjoyable experience and therefore had not promoted any appreciation of either reading or literature. This would suggest that providing a positive, thorough explanation of the reasons for the requirement is essential, along with offering constant encouragement.

Y.Y. I can say that graded readers did not increase my appreciation and love for literature. However, they contributed a lot to my English proficiency...Actually, maybe because of the simplified language I did not find the stories to be literary works...

This final comment is surprising, as it reflects a degree of annoyance with the simplified language used in graded readers. One would expect that the challenge of dealing with new vocabulary would be one students would wish to avoid, as can be seen in several comments cited here, such as the 'torture' of using the dictionary what might be interpreted as the 'linguistic difficulty' of reading in English.

Conclusion

It would seem that, according to EFL/ESL research, the benefits of pleasure reading to foreign language learning have been confirmed, but our research brings up doubts as to students' perceptions of the effectiveness of required reading. In this research we interviewed preparatory school EFL students studying in the final module of a five-module program in which reading a minimum number of graded readers was a requirement. While we wished to learn whether participants thought this requirement had been beneficial to their EFL learning, our main focus was on learning about their ideas as to whether reading graded readers had encouraged extensive reading for pleasure. The results were disappointing – only 19 of the 44 participants said they would continue reading literary works in the future, and the other 25 were either unsure about or unwilling to maintain their reading of literature in the future.

In our analysis of the data, and in particular that discussed above, what stood out strikingly was resentment towards the requirement to read. We have therefore decided that further research into the presentation of the requirement of reading is called for. We feel that this is especially important because we are working with many students who, as several citations above from the data illustrate, prefer watching the movie version rather than reading any written version of literature. The students probably do not realize the limitations of this form of adaptation, and these should be explained. On the other hand, there were students who felt that graded readers were not literature, which in a sense is correct. It could be interpreted that these students, and possibly others, were put off by being required to read something that had been simplified – it could have seemed insulting or did not offer a real challenge. This would indicate that the option of reading either graded readers or the original text should be included in the reading requirement. This could also allow the students some control over their learning, empowering them to make their own decisions as to how much effort they would put into the endeavour, and would emphasize the necessity of taking personal responsibility for learning. It has been noted that:

Since effort is something over which learners have control, this emphasis establishes their responsibility, reduces their feeling of helplessness, increases their tendency to persevere, and helps them to feel genuine pride of accomplishment. (Wlodkowski 1998:104)

Putting forth effort is indispensable, but learning to meet requirements is an crucial factor of education, and their institution should not be avoided. This is especially true as to the requirement of reading, particularly when working with students who are non-readers.

However, since a principal issue is to get them to understand the pleasure of reading, it would seem logical that the requirement to read should be thoroughly explained, its presentation should be made as non-threatening as possible, and constant encouragement should be given. It will be interesting to see what students' are to such teaching methodology!

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