

The Importance of Reading as a Means of Acquiring Language

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This article is an adapted version of a research assignment, a literature review, from a third year student enrolled in the University of the South Pacific's course ED 350 Curriculum Studies II.

Introduction

This report highlights reading as a means of acquiring language. There is an urgent need to improve the quality of English language teaching in schools so that students are not penalised in their school work and public examinations across the curriculum by poor English language skills. The writer believes that the school's approach to reading is a crucial issue here, and involves the home and the community as well.

The writer's experience of learning in Fiji schools is one of dissatisfaction with the English texts, either because they were written for other countries (e.g. the P.R. Smart *Let's Learn English in the 70s* books for New Zealand) or because they were boring as they followed a set format with very little variety in content and method (e.g. the Link books). Despite this dissatisfaction, the students in the writer's school did well in English, and this is possibly because they read Mills and Boone and comic books like Archie 'under cover'.

Book Flood Studies

The benefits of reading are well known, but factual evidence and details of exactly how reading benefits children is provided by a number of studies, some of which are briefly described in the following paragraphs.

One such study was undertaken by Elley and Mangubhai in 1980 (Elley and Mangubhai, 1981). They investigated the effects of a book flood in Classes 4 and 5 in eight selected primary schools in Fiji. The students' progress in English after a period of eight months was compared to that of students in four other 'control' schools where the teachers had continued their normal English classes without the 'flood' of books. The impact of the books was clearly positive. It was most marked in general reading skills — twice the expected rate of progress in tests of Reading Comprehension — but the students also did significantly better in tests of Listening Comprehension (Class 5), English Structures (Class 4) and Oral Sentence Repetition (Class 4).

Book floods have also been successful in Niue, Singapore, Sri Lanka and South Africa, as described in Elley's article *The Potential of Book Floods for Raising Literacy Levels*, (Elley 2000:236). In the same article, Elley mentions the donation of books to a school in Fiji by actor Raymond Burr and how it caused a dramatic improvement in the examination record of the children.

In another study, an Australian school adopted an English programme which involved flooding the students with paperbacks. Here, "reading test scores improved dramatically

and student writing improved” (Saxby 1997:43).

In the UK, Hafiz and Tudor investigated the effects of extensive reading on English as a Second Language learners. They found that “[E]xtensive L2 input in a tension free environment can contribute significantly to the enhancement of learners’ language skills, both receptive [reading and listening] and productive [writing and talking] (Hafiz and Tudor, 1989:8).

Dlugosz (1999) maintains that reading is important in the teaching of a foreign language, and that even those who have not yet learned to read in their own language will benefit from learning in a foreign language.

Motivating children to read

The benefits, then, to children’s language skills are significant. The next question is: how do we motivate children to read?

Reed maintains that “one of the easiest and most enjoyable ways to motivate young children to read is to introduce them to the wide world of young and adult literature” (Reed, 1985).

Krashen (1993:47-8) supports the idea of flooding children with books which he describes as light reading. He states that “perhaps the most powerful way of encouraging children to read is by exposing them to light reading, a kind of reading that schools pretend does not exist and a kind of reading that many children, for economic or ideological reasons, are deprived of ” and gives examples which include comics strips like Phantom, Superman and Peanuts. Furthermore, Krashen emphasises that children must read first and foremost for

enjoyment and pleasure. They must read freely, without fear of having to write book reports, or answering questions or looking up meanings of difficult words. Children learn more new vocabulary from reading than from any instruction (Krashen, 1993:15)

Simpson (1964) highlights staff and parental support, creating reading centres, selection of appropriate material and educating the community on the values of reading. Reading is everyone’s business and a community that is interested in literacy will contribute a lot to fostering a love of books in the young generation.

Across the curriculum

Chase (1964) highlights the subject teachers’ role in helping children to read. She states that the type of language used in textbooks differs from that used in stories. Subject teachers also need to be teachers of reading.

Conclusion

All good things come at a price. The price for improved reading ability and hence improved performance across the curriculum is the cost of books, colourful, high interest books. It is an investment in the future. “In the long run, the cost of not investing in a successful literacy programme would surely be much greater than the cost of implementation” states Elley (2000:250-2).

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