



READING AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL FOR TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Teaser: An Ecuadorian ELT focuses on teacher-centered approaches, developing grammar skills by practicing isolated concepts but neglecting students' interests and needs. These practices result in low student performance. However, using reading as a pedagogical tool significantly improves student understanding, textual analyses, overall language learning, and reading confidence in university level English courses.

Keywords: Teaching English, Reading Comprehension, Pedagogical Tool.

English teaching professionals worldwide are constantly wondering about what best teaching practices should be used to teach English, and in general, how to introduce reading and writing to their daily teaching practices. Traditionally teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) or as a Foreign Language (EFL) have taken reading and writing separately from each other (Tsai, 2006). Most of them have concentrated on using English teaching methodologies that mainly emphasize the repetition of grammar structures, vocabulary, isolated and artificial language contents. As an overall result, those types of methodologies have caused demotivation, boredom, frustration and even aversions toward learning English at elementary, high school and university levels. Universidad de Cuenca (UC) students, in most cases, take English classes only for complying with a compulsory requirement for graduation, which lead them to dislike the English language. However, Ecuador is in urgent need of emphasizing English learning to be part of a globalized world. The director of the National Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation stated that if Ecuadorians do not know English, we are lost in this era of knowledge because almost 90% of publications are in English (Ramirez, 2013).

According to the Red Académica Nacional de Idiomas (RANI), in order for students to be able to complete their undergraduate university study programs, they must possess a B2 level of the Common

European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL). Moreover, it is well known that knowledge and an acceptable English proficiency in master's as well as doctoral graduate programs, where there is an important component of scientific and academic reading in English, is a must. Therefore, it is imperative to rethink the teaching methodologies and tools used for teaching and learning English as a foreign language, and it is our belief that extensive English reading might be the answer to the demand and to the future national educational requirement for Ecuadorian university undergraduates.

Literature Review

According to Tsai (2006), the use of reading for writing and writing for reading are two strategies for reading instruction that facilitate learning a foreign language in the classroom. Additionally, Richard and Smith (2002) argues that to develop reading habits, encourage knowledge of grammar structures and vocabulary, and nurture the love of reading, the administration of intensive reading programs in regular courses of teaching a language is recommended. Pluck (2013) points out that the introduction of reading academic and scientific articles to English teaching presents additional challenges for students, but that the overall benefits are also significant. Krashen (2004) points out that those who practice recreational reading show better development in reading, writing, grammar and

vocabulary, both for children and adults. Krashen (1985) cited by Mikulecky (2008) indicates that the best way to improve reading is reading. Meyer (2014) in her UC Language Department Evaluation report, believes that including reading of academic and general English material gives us the possibility of having outcomes of a B2 level of the CEFRL.

The benefits of intensive reading include reading fluency, vocabulary acquisition, grammar awareness, models for writing and an immersion in the culture of the foreign language. Krashen also suggests that the use of reading in regular English courses enables students to develop a basic understanding of written texts, which in turn enables them to acquire the necessary language, constructs such as grammar, rules for writing, listening, speaking and so on thereby facilitating language acquisition.

The Universidad de Cuenca, during recent years, is in a transition process from a teaching university to a teaching university with research and internationalization perspectives. To achieve these goals, it is vital to include more English reading activities in our research, teaching and administrative endeavors. A university that reads is a university with a clear vision and mission; a university that reads will progress and become more competitive. Outside observers of the English teaching situation at the UC argue that it is necessary to rethink about how to implement different teaching practices. The emphasis must be on reading as the main teaching practice for the acquisition of a foreign language that can enhance the practice of reading updated literature for teaching and research.

Pablo Vanegas, the President of the University of Cuenca, cited by Meyer (2014) points out the need to include reading practices in our English program since it is one the most important skills to develop and the foundation for the remaining language skills of listening, writing, grammar, vocabulary and speaking. He emphasizes that 80% of an English course at university level should be based on reading and 20% on writing.

In order to plan a course where reading is accepted as a main tool for teaching English as a foreign language, it is important to take into account the following considerations: the first consideration is the student population with which the university English instructors work. By knowing the interests of our student population, in addition to their overall English level, we will be able to select appropriate methodologies together with school administration, students, and instructors, taking into account the individuality and synergy present in each student and in the group with which we work. Second, there must be interest and motivation in both teachers and pupils,

since these are determining factors in accomplishing language learning. Third, we must think about the proper selection of reading material that will comprise much of the content of the teaching-learning program for certain courses. Additionally, it is important that the English instructor be a role model. A teacher, whether at university, high school or elementary, who does not read, can hardly be an adequate example and will not be able to motivate students to read.

Feyen, (2014) in his PowerPoint presentation on *How to bring research into teaching* indicates that a) it is necessary to develop the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. To increase reading, he suggests to further motivate students to read articles related to the course content; b) for writing exercises, ask students to give an overview of the reading material; c) we should practice oral presentations in the classroom; and d) students must listen to comments and suggestions from the teacher or their peers.

There are numerous EFL methodologies mentioned by research about teaching English as a foreign language that respond to different approaches, paradigms, interests, contexts and realities. It is very clear to Ecuadorian English instructors that not all students who are pursuing careers at university intend to study their master's or doctoral programs in English-speaking countries or become pure researchers; on the contrary, the main concern and intention of most of them is passing these language courses to get their undergraduate degrees. However, our work as university instructors is to guide these groups of students to take into account the enormous possibilities that knowing English can offer them. If students do not have the intention to pursue graduate studies within or outside the country where English is required, they should be at least aware of and consider the enormous benefits that learning another language represents not only in academia, but also in their professional and personal lives. Consequently, we think that reading can be used as an educational tool, and must be included in the daily practice of teaching and learning a foreign language. By incorporating reading in our English program at the School of Psychology, students will be able to increase their level of understanding and feel more confident when reading academic and general English.

Discussion

Significant improvement in understanding reading texts related to general English and Psychology has been shown during a semester where we emphasized the use of reading as a

pedagogical tool to teach English in an Ecuadorian University context. It was also observed that confidence levels in reading both for academic and general English material were high. It is, therefore, possible to include reading as an educational tool in regular courses as it provides the possibility of further improvements in English teaching and learning.

As Tsai (2006) points out, the use of reading and writing as pedagogical strategies can promote the development of the other language skills. Pluck (2013) points out that the use of reading is a different methodological experience that challenges both instructors and students to explore their own capacities of understanding text materials that are related to their field of study or expertise. It is also our contention that reading material related to university courses increases students' ability to understand more technical and general vocabulary, improving their writing, vocabulary, oral skills and expanding knowledge in their majors.

Pablo Vanegas, the UC president, cited by Meyer (2014) argues that reading should occupy 80% of the class practice and content and 20% writing. Integrating reading and writing in English courses offered in the School of Psychology has given acceptable results since writing practices were possible to carry out during the semester. Students wrote an average of 200-word journals based on what they read, and about their chosen topic for journaling.

Feyen (2015), on the other hand, recommends practicing reading, writing, listening and speaking skills in a university English class in which the students would be the main protagonist of the teaching and learning process. In the School of Psychology, students were supposed to read an article of their choice, prepare a Power Point or a flip chart presentation that would be presented to the rest of the class, prepared a 200-word



summary of the reading, 20 questions about the text, true and false questions, vocabulary, spelling and a discussion exercise for practicing speaking skills both with the instructor and their classmates. These kinds of language acquisition practices were accepted by most students where they saw relevance and motivated them to try to function in a foreign language.

However, some students indicated that the readings and the writing exercises assigned for this particular English course were very extensive, and that there was a lot of new and difficult vocabulary to understand. It is possible to have this kind of reaction due to the fact that reading as well as writing is not the strongest habits in most of our student and teacher populations. This approach presented new challenges and demands, but there were obstacles to be resolved by the significant benefits that this method offered to this type of student population.

Implications for the Classroom

On the basis of our particular experience, we can come to the conclusion that incorporating reading as a pedagogical tool for teaching EFL in Latin-American universities has the following implications:

- We can firmly state that reading must occupy a very important and significant place in the English teaching and learning process and be incorporated more frequently in regular language university English courses.

- It is time to grow as academics and not to continue using the old and obsolete ways of offering English curricula but find new ways that respond to current realities instead of boring, frustrating and insulting students' intellectual capacities..
- It is time to stop copying and pasting the scope and sequences of commercial English textbooks in our English courses syllabi and start challenging our English instructors and students.
- It is also recommended not to underestimate students' capabilities and linguistic transfer skills that complement the implementation of this type of educational strategy where the main emphasis is to understand academic and general English.
- We should bear in mind when working with homogeneous groups that belong to the same major, that if we include students from other majors that easily fit into the group, the chances of succeeding in learning a new language increase and are more rewarding.
- It is also imperative to get to know our group of students in more depth and think they bring a lot to offer to our English classes.
- We language instructors, should be more aware that university students nowadays enter university much better prepared in the area of language for the easy access they have to technology.
- Our students need to take more advanced, demanding, and challenging English courses that truly prepare and enable them to take standardized tests such as the TOEFL, GRE, CEFRL, and so on for admission to foreign universities or for the master's or doctoral programs offered nationally and worldwide.
- Using reading as a pedagogical tool can benefit our students to ready them for bigger and more rewarding challenges.
- English reading comprehension is one of the most evaluated skills in almost all entrance examinations in most foreign universities and graduate programs at national or international levels. Therefore, it is time to emphasize more reading in our English courses.
- Finally, we conclude by inviting language instructors in general to read more with EFL students, consider the incorporation of reading as an effective pedagogical tool for instruction, and conduct further research on this important topic.

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