

The power of extensive reading in English as a Foreign Language acquisition: implications and suggestions

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Abstract

One of the main skills to be acquired in the foreign language learning process is reading. The main objective here is to achieve a fluent reading in which students are able to understand and interpret messages. Extensive silent reading is an excellent tool to reach these objectives, due to its free-anxiety approach and its motivating potential. It also offers a great deal of linguistic advantages, as well as more global learning developments in the kids. In this article we will analyse these advantages, suggesting some strategies and techniques to carry out this activity in the classroom.

Keywords: Silent reading, book, English library, motivation, reading competence, language acquisition

Título: El poder de la lectura extensiva en la adquisición del Inglés como lengua extranjera: implicaciones y sugerencias.

Resumen

Una de las principales habilidades que han de adquirirse en el proceso de aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera es la lectura. El objetivo primero es alcanzar una lectura fluida en la que los estudiantes son capaces de entender e interpretar mensajes. La lectura extensiva es una herramienta excelente para alcanzar estos objetivos, debido a su estrategia alejada de estrés y su potencial motivador. Además, ofrece una gran cantidad de ventajas lingüísticas y otros desarrollos del aprendizaje más globales en el niño. En este artículo analizaremos estas ventajas, sugiriendo algunas estrategias para llevar a cabo esta actividad en la clase.

Palabras clave: Silent reading, book, English library, motivation, reading competence, language acquisition.

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INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION

Acquiring a second language requires a long process in which cognitive, procedural and mechanical skills take part. Moreover, nowadays the importance of a child-centered methodology is essential, and every new approach bases its principles in concepts related with constructivism and taking into account student's necessities in its methodology. For this reason, our competence as teachers is to look for tools, techniques and approaches that favour the student's wellness when he or she is learning a foreign language. As it has been proved, motivation is an important factor that may impact in the student's way of learning, fostering the development of the language acquisition. Reading could be one of these tools to offer the learner an easier and friendlier acquisition of English as a second language.

Reading is one of the four macro skills that should be developed in order to acquire any language, along with listening, speaking and writing. The main objective when learning a foreign language is to achieve a Communicative competence, that is, being able to communicate through correct utterances in different situations. By using reading skills, people is able to understand, analyse and interpret written language, which constitutes a vast range of our current communication.

EXTENSIVE READING: TEACHING AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

There are several reading techniques and strategies that students have to develop during their learning process. Reading in a extensive way means to read without the necessity or duty of looking for information, details and specific data. It has to do with pleasure and enjoyment. Extensive reading could be a very effective teaching tool if we present it in a careful and prepared way. Specifically, one of the techniques used in extensive reading is silent reading, which consist of reading in silence, normally in an individual and voluntary way.

Several reasons can be highlighted when using silent or extensive reading. One of the most evident is related to Stephen Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, and it states that acquisition happened in a free-anxiety environment is more likely to succeed. Krashen upholds that negative emotional feelings will be an impediment in language acquisition.

By carrying out extensive reading, children are learning in an unconscious way, and they know that after reading the book they will not be assessed or evaluated. For this reason, every learning process occurred while the student is reading (for example, that he learns a new word) will be more authentic: he will really internalize the knowledge, not just hold it during a small period of time in order to complete exercise or to carry out an exam. Furthermore, and following another Krashen's hypothesis, extensive reading fulfils the "comprehensible input hypothesis", that is the notion of presenting language inputs one stage further the current language level of the students in order to increase their acquisition. It doesn't matter if books are one step advanced to the student's level and they are not able to understand everything, indeed, this can be a positive feature in the second language learning process.

Reading skill is one of the four macro skills to be developed during the English learning process. In a purely linguistic view, it offers a lot of advantages. One of them, is the memorization and reinforcement of vocabulary and structures due to the visual nature of the activity. Moreover it fosters writing input and improvement, something essential in the case of English, where writing language lacks in correspondence with oral language. In addition, it will help to the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills, as it is an autonomous activity which implies the use of thinking strategies to deduce meanings. It will be also one of the few opportunities to increase their reading speed, which is acquired essentially through practice.

From a more global view, reading enhances imagination and creativity, two essential abilities in childhood that have a high impact in the child's learning process. Finally, it will increase autonomy strategies that the student can transfer to other fields and it will raise general knowledge of the world.

SUGGESTED TECHNIQUES AND ACTIVITIES TO BE USED IN EXTENSIVE READING

Sometimes teachers, totally focused on a functional way of teaching, lost sight about what can be the interests and curiosities of our pupils. For sure, they will be pleased to have the opportunity of reading in English classroom, and this motivation-based environment will ease the acquisition of the foreign language. Henceforth, there will be suggested some techniques and ideas that can be helpful when planning extensive reading in classroom. It is true that at the beginning the process will be slow, and we will not see immediate results. Creating a vocation and fostering reading curiosity will be a long-term process, but results will be very profitable when they flourish.

One of the easiest ways to enhance this interest in books will be by creating an English book corner. A lot of classrooms include a library, but normally they are just made up of mother tongue books. We propose to prepare a reading space exclusively dedicated to English. Decoration is important to call the attention of the students, so we will display the books efficiently, hanging motivating sentences or setting up a book-recording that can be shared by all the group (for instance, each time a pupil reads a book, he paints a part of a big framing). This decoration process should be done with the help of the students, who can contribute with their ideas and opinions, so they will feel part of the process, feeling it as something personal and not as something imposed by the teacher. We can also design a borrowing system, tracing their readings and offering "review's sheets", where they can give their book's opinion if they fancy.

Book's selection has to be done according to the student's current level. It seems obvious that Primary Education students will not be ready to understand a whole book, even if it is adapted to their level. They do not have still enough language and cognitive mastery to manage a full text. We do not have to worry about this, because of two reasons: first, our objective here is not to work accuracy and intensive language features, but fostering another way of learning, without pressure and teacher's control. The main goal for this activity is being able to deduce and understand meaning from the context and create a positive attitude toward books.

Secondly, as previously explained, input hypothesis support effectiveness on English acquisition when the input level is one grade further to their current level. This way, there is no negative side if learners do not understand some words, grammatical patterns or meanings, provided they enjoy reading and unconsciously, they are retaining language features. Moreover, we will select all kinds of books and topics, in order to cover every student's likes, interests and tastes. If they are not attracted by any of the books, they will not be willing to read.

If teachers detect that one book's language is very complicated for their current level, or at least, it is not achievable for those students that have more difficulties with foreign language, they should modify it. One of the best and easiest techniques is to use "rebus stories", which consist of replacing some keywords for images. The teacher can create the images and stick them in the book.

Nevertheless, creating a reading space will not have sense if we do not dedicate time to it. Normally, extensive reading is considered as a time filler at the end of the lesson. By contrast, students must feel that extensive reading is an important activity to start a truly interest towards it, and nothing demonstrates value more than time. Apart from having the library ready for those who have spare time and fast task-finisher, we can arrange our teaching planning dedicating at least 30 weekly minutes to extensive reading. In this period, we can plan different activities and techniques in order to make it more exciting and dynamic, but always having in mind that this activity is based on student's autonomy and it must be directly controlled by the teacher as less as possible.

Pair reading is one of the most used techniques, and it consist on read a book in couples. One of the students can read and the other points to the text helping him, and then they switch roles. This technique can be also used with small groups of pupils, where each of them can have a role. Another interesting idea here is the model reading behaviour, which consist on providing a model that students can imitate. The best model is undoubtedly the teacher, so it will be very positive that the teacher reads a book at the same time the students are carrying out the activity.

Another idea is to prepare "special days" related to reading. Here, time dedicated to extensive reading in classroom will have a specific thematic and it can be accompanied by some activities and games, in order to motivate students. For instance, we can think up "The poetry day", "Comic's exchange", etc. Furthermore, extensive reading can be linked to new technologies. There is books and tales galore on the Internet, as well as technological devices as e-books or tablets that can be used occasionally.

The role of the teacher regarding extensive reading may be tricky. We should not interfere in the process, but we have to control and prepare it. This means that we will not take part in the selection of the book by the student, we will never force any student to read a book, we will not help him to read it in a direct way and, in the case of carrying out activities, they should be as autonomous and free as possible. The objective here is to prompt unconscious learning of English in an enjoyable way. This does not mean that we will not pay attention to the progresses of the pupils, as our mission is to ensure the readiness of the books, make suggestions, stimulate and encourage. By doing so, we will contributing not only to the acquisition of communicative competencies, but to the global development of this little people. Reading will enable them to enjoy one of the best activities and will give them two powerful tools to face the real world: words and ideas.

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