

Introducing Reading for Entertainment to Large Classes: A Practical, Innovative and Cost Effective Technique

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Abstract

Large groups of young adults in large classes were encouraged during exposure to attractive, multifaceted reading material in the controlled environment of a classroom. Repeated exposure resulted in misgiving being replaced with interest and later demand for such material as a source of pleasure. This congenial activity lead to voluntary use of similar but more easily obtainable books of fiction of their own interest at times of leisure. These findings suggest that perception bias can be reduced through encouragement and better understanding of the supposedly tedious activity of reading leading to reading solely for entertainment.

Key words: large classes, reading, classroom, books, fiction, entertainment

With increasing choice of entertainment provided by the multiplication of television channels and availability of inexpensive DVD films in Pakistan, reading for entertainment is not an option commonly accepted by those who have access to other sources of entertainment. Given a choice, very few young people are seen opting for a novel or a book of short stories to pass the time.

The progressively more prohibitive cost of books has added to the gradual disappearance of works of fiction from most homes. The storage of books, prone to silverfish and other pests is treated as a practical problem by most home makers. The quantity of modern fiction in both government and privately run college libraries has become severely limited due to budget constraints.

Due to lack of availability of entertaining books, most language teachers have resorted to encouraging newspaper reading to students with weak language skills. This has driven most students even further away from reading for entertainment, cutting them off effectively from the fastest vocabulary and syntax building tool available to a language teacher.

In spite of their availability, e-book reading devices are seldom used in Pakistan. Parents cannot be blamed for buying “cool” telephones for their children instead of a Kindle. Even in designing new houses the provision for a library or a study is seldom kept. Appendix A shows the resultant vicious circle.

The trend can be seen as universal and certainly not limited to Pakistan. In high schools in the USA, for example, it is considered “un-cool” to read a work of fiction openly for fear of being labeled as a “nerd” or “geek”.(Chandra Vallan, personal communication, June 7, 2007) The interesting exception to this has been J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Pottor* books and more recently the *Twilight* series of books. Much has been written to demonstrate their appeal to young readers, especially young female readers. In case of other books peer pressure prevents a significant number of students from reading fiction openly and soon they lose all desire to do so.

Fluency in a language is promoted by extensive reading individually and silently for the purpose of enjoyment. Obviously reading is learnt through extensive reading by learners. Reading in classrooms is considered as reading instruction. As Rigg (1998, 216) points out, “reading is what the student does alone, with the text. Reading instruction is what the teacher does with the students to help them when they read.” The teacher is indirectly involved in the process, motivating the learners to read and facilitating the provision of authentic material. Currently, texts for extensive reading are rarely included in ESL textbooks (most likely for economic and space constraints). For this reason, it is necessary to make interesting long reading selections together with opportunities for silent reading available to learners in and out of classroom.

In English speaking countries magazines are inexpensive and very popular. Magazines for young people from such countries have content that is not culturally suitable for our country. Articles like “Bad Boys Exposed! What he really thinks when he snogs you” and “Raped for Years by My Piano Teacher” (Cosmo Girl: October, 2006) are not exactly suitable for our youngsters. Even comparatively safe looking magazines about music have content that is highly unsuitable. “5 Boy Secrets from *Just Friends*” and “I’ve Got My Dream Boy—Cheryl Tweeds spills her secrets.” (Smash Hits: January16, 2006).

In Pakistan, most English magazines are targeted at the adult or rather the middle aged section of the population. They have little to hold the interest of young readers. Discussion with parents and my own peer group reveals almost no attempt to read anything beyond the daily newspaper which too is not read on a regular basis. Television has taken the place of

novels and it is rapidly replacing the newspaper as well. Very little family support is available for young readers today.

As pointed out by Coady (1979:9), a typical reading class involves the reading of a passage followed by comprehension questions, vocabulary and grammatical exercises. In this manner a 10-15 minutes reading exercise is followed by 50-100 minutes doing language exercises and correcting them. This process, under no circumstances can be categorized as entertainment.

Unfortunately a teacher of an institute of higher education in most developing countries, including Pakistan, who wants to bring about a paradigm shift by making reading a pleasurable activity, is given no help by the institution he or she is working for. Finding suitable time that can be used for this activity is also considered his or her responsibility. As work load is heavy, other faculty members are not easily convinced to take up any extra burden.

At high school or undergraduate level classes are large and getting students to start reading at home or in classrooms anything that is not directly related to their literature based English language course in Pakistan, was found to be a virtual impossibility. "Will this come in the examination?" was a question often asked by students when a thought provoking short story was read out in class in the past. Books were given as prizes, but were seldom read.

Method

For the purpose of this research a group of 200 students freshly admitted to First Year Intermediate classes different faculties at DA College for Women were selected and an attempt was made to teach reading for entertainment to them in large classes. When asked which the last book they read was, these students invariably mentioned some abridged novel they read at school. Of the 200 such students of different faculties surveyed, 187 produced this response. A book had been read voluntarily by only 6.5 % in the last one year. These statistics would be considered terrifying for a language teacher. Graphic representation of these statistics is shown in Appendix B

A magazine was selected for its coverage of a wide variety of topics which can be considered neither childish nor dull. The students were then exposed to old copies of the *Readers' Digest* for one year in classes in which substitute teachers engaged them when their own subject teachers were absent or busy elsewhere.

This helped in taking away from these students the fear of reading on their own while also reducing dependence on teachers to "explain" to them what they had been reading. The aim was to see whether exposure to interesting reading material in class would increase interest in pursuing reading for entertainment in these students' free time.

A large number of old copies of the magazine *Readers Digest* were available at home. Thus no economic burden was caused. Initially these magazines were taken to work and lent to students who were weak at English. 50-60 copies of this light weight magazine were carried to Substitution Classes, especially on exhausting days. Initially there was some resistance had to be overcome from students who were not used to the concept of silent reading. When given a choice, as expected, at first there was often a tie between presenting a verbal point of view and silent reading as few students get a chance to tell others what they feel in large classes. When topics are appealing and the atmosphere benign, young people love to discuss aspects of their lives, problems they want solved, and matters of mutual interest with their class and an encouraging authority figure.

In the beginning requesting students to opt for reading a magazine article had been heartbreaking as they had to be informed that one did not have the strength to act as a

moderator. This always worked as we were actually so short staffed at that point that someone or the other fell ill with the exhaustion of teaching far more classes than is advisable for any EFL/ESL Instructor. Students were found to be generally understanding and responsive to a sincere appeal.

In this way this exercise in getting large groups to read silently any article that appealed to them was started. Jokes and quotable quotes were seen to be read first. It was observed that students moved on to articles on relationships, or courage, or even health.

Observations were made while circulating in the class without disturbing anyone to check to see what was being read. This opportunity was also used to encourage students to read without moving their lips and tracing lines. They were told by quietly that it did not look attractive and slowed them down. This time was also used to show them that a young woman reading a good English book, or even a magazine, sends out positive non-verbal visual cues. Students were told that it makes her look intelligent, educated, and very very attractive. At times a quick verbal image was created of a girl reading *The Crow Eaters* by Bapsi Sidhwa quietly on a long flight, or at the airport, or in a dentist's waiting-room, or in her parent's office comparing her with another blankly staring at others. Different examples were used with different groups by choosing books that were popular and accessible. Students were told that those who read are taken seriously by people who matter and their opinion is treated with much more respect than the views of a non-reader. Slowly it was shown how books have been instrumental in creating a positive image and why they are the best antidote to despair.

More second-hand copies of *Readers Digest* were bought from the Sunday Bazaar to replace those that were falling apart for years before this research was conducted. A positive change was observed in students. Barriers were overcome and stories were shared. At times an article was finished quickly by a fast reader creating disappointment at the end of the period when she was in the middle of a new one. Such students were allowed to take the magazine home to complete the article, and to borrow it for a day. After the entire magazine was not owned by the college.

These copies of the *Readers Digest* were taken in Substitution Classes by other members of the English Department more and more often. Silent reading had already become popular when this research was conducted. Several lecturers had already informed me that they often read along with their class enjoying a period of tranquility while setting a good example for students.

Results

In September 2012, another survey was conducted using almost the same group of students who were now in their second year of education in the college. 52 students had read at least one novel during the summer break and said that they had enjoyed the experience. In Figure 2 is shown the remarkable 400% increase in the number of students who read for entertainment, a miraculous 26% from the original 6.5%.

More and more students have started carrying novels in their bags. They are also observed reading books calmly in their free periods in public, in corridors, on benches. When interest was shown sometimes books they like were brought by students which were returned after reading to teach them to respect other people's property. When books were lent to students, they too behaved with responsibility, with loss of only one book to a student.

Conclusion

This rather informal research has been shared and conducted to show that exposure to quality interesting reading matter will increase the thirst for more of such material leading to

investment in books of their own. A 400% increase in young adults who read for entertainment has proved to be very encouraging. Since second-hand books are available and books can be shared, no economic burden is placed on parents or financiers of this activity.

Recommendations

As female young adults are provided with very few sources of entertainment, it is best to introduce them to books at an early stage in life. Quality fiction has been observed to add to vocabulary building, imagination, tolerance, better expression, a sense of self-worth, and enduring leadership qualities. This is not to be considered as a luxury for developing countries like Pakistan; it has become a necessity, an important training for human resource available to us to be passed on to the new generation which is to be raised by these budding readers.

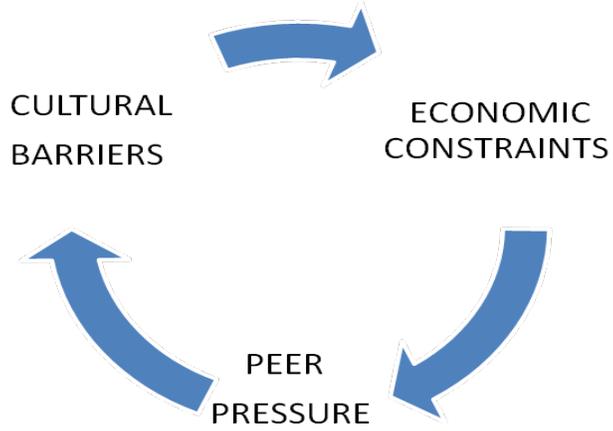
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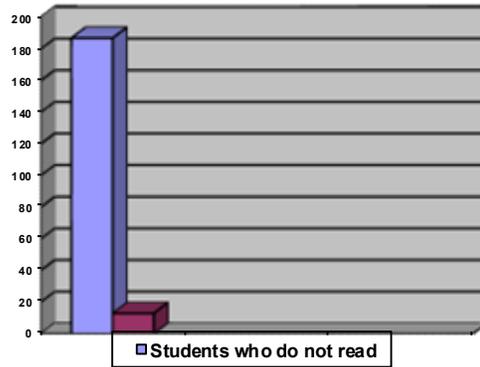
Appendix A

What prevents young adults from reading for pleasure?



Appendix B

Students of DA College for Women, who read fiction in September, 2011



Appendix C

Students of DA College for Women, who read fiction in August, 2012