



The appropriacy of reading texts to develop reading skills

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Country: Ethiopia

Topic
Appropriacy of reading texts to develop reading skills

Research Questions

Exploratory research question
What activities are I planning to develop reading skills?
What do students think about their reading texts?
What makes reading texts difficult for students?
What do students think of the texts I use to develop reading skills?
What challenges do students face in their reading of the texts?

Tools

Tools used in research

1. Questionnaire
2. Focus group discussions
3. Reflective journal

Action taken

Actions implemented

- I prepared more culturally appropriate reading texts.
- I pre-taught cultural context which is not familiar for the students.
- I used vocabulary which is simple and easy in the reading text.
- I give extra time for the reading text.

Tools used to find out the result of implementation

- Focus group discussion
- Reflective journal
- Peer observation

Findings

Findings

- Students think that the reading text is culturally inappropriate for them.
- They think reading is difficult or uninteresting because the words are difficult and the text is not culturally tailored for the students.
- The students think that they need more time to read in unstructured texts.
- They don't have a challenge with the very readability is poor.
- The students think that they would like to see more, more cultural in their text.

Result!

- Students realize the text which was prepared in culturally appropriate ways than the reading text before the reading text was prepared.
- The students improve their reading skills and they are more interested in reading.
- Students realize that they need more time to read in unstructured texts.
- The students think that they would like to see more, more cultural in their text.



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Ethiopia

My name is Geremew Wozie and I work for the Ethiopian Police University Peacekeeping Language Centre located in Addis Ababa near Mexico Square. My students are police officers who are learning English ready to be deployed later as peacekeepers on English-speaking UN peacekeeping missions. They are adult intermediate-level students. The textbooks we use are Campaign English for the Military and Campaign English for Law Enforcement, which are specially prepared for peacekeepers. There are three levels in our peacekeeping language centre. Level one is equal to elementary, level two is equal to intermediate level and level three is equal to upper intermediate or advanced level. My students were level-two students, which is equivalent to a lower intermediate level. The courses are given half a day for three hours from Monday to Friday for four months at each level.

My reason for conducting this exploratory action research is that I observed my students struggling to understand the reading text I use in class and their lack of understanding thereof in some of the reading activities when we practise the development of their reading skills. Reading is one of the four major skills that we practise in class as it is a key language skill.

To help me understand the problem facing my students, I used the following exploratory research questions:

- 1. What do students think about their reading texts?**
- 2. What makes reading texts difficult for students?**
- 3. What do students think of the texts I use to develop reading skills?**
- 4. What challenges do students face in their reading of the texts?**

These questions enabled me to put the problem into perspective. To gather data on these questions, I used the following research tools: questionnaires, focus group discussions and a reflective journal. I had 30 students in the class and, from these, ten students participated in answering the questionnaire and five participated in a focus group discussion. The questionnaire asked students about the reading text we use in the class, its cultural appropriacy, the words used in the reading practice and the time allocated to the reading. In a focus group discussion, the points covered were students' preference of kinds of reading, students' opinion of reading texts we use in the class, challenges students face when practising reading in the class and what could be done to solve the challenges. I used a reflective journal to record my perceptions and observations in class before and after the implementation of the action. I took notes on the reading activities I was developing and what I expected to achieve through them. I also focused on why developing reading skills was important to me, as well as what I wanted to see happening with the learners' reading skills. Finally, I reflected on the kind of texts I used to develop learners' reading skills, what I expected from using these texts and the difficulties I had experienced in using them to develop reading skills.

After the analysis of the data, three students indicated that the text I used during reading

practice in the class was culturally inappropriate and complained about its difficulty and unfamiliarity with its content. The three students also indicated that they were unfamiliar with the reading material context. The textbooks that we use are Campaign English for the Military and Campaign English for Law Enforcement. The students said that the cultural aspect of the reading is based on the NATO context and it deals with European and American issues which were completely unfamiliar to them. That was why learners were complaining about its difficulty (focus group interview).

The findings also revealed that the time given for reading practice was not adequate, and two students complained that they did not complete the reading tasks in the time allocated and thus were unable to engage with the text further. This was corroborated by the questionnaire, where seven of the students indicated that the time given to practise reading was inadequate.

The vocabulary in the reading text was difficult for students as well. In the observations, students were seen struggling to comprehend and practise reading. They would stop at unfamiliar words, interfering with the reading pace and speed. They would lose focus while reading, no longer following the meaning of the text. About six students agreed with this issue, saying that the words used in the reading text make the reading difficult.

Based on these findings, I designed an action plan. After understanding the situation, the actions I implemented to solve problems, which I deemed to be appropriate to help with the situation, were as follows.

- **I prepared more culturally appropriate reading texts to enable students to relate to the texts, thus increasing comprehension.**
- **I pre-taught culturally contextual texts which were not familiar to the students. This would go to help provide a needed background to facilitate understanding of materials.**
- **I used vocabulary which is simple and easy in the reading text. During the pre-reading of the text, I pre-taught vocabulary. This ensured that students approached the reading with some level of understanding of the vocabulary. This would enable them to avoid stopping upon arrival at unfamiliar words.**
- **To respond to the issue of reading time, I gave more time for the reading text.**

These actions were implemented in class for four weeks for a total of about 12 hours.

To monitor and evaluate the effect of the actions, I used focus group interviews, peer observations and a reflective journal as research tools. Five students participated in the focus group discussions, in which they reflected on their opinions of the actions implemented and their effects. For the second tool – a reflective journal – I noted the changes observed and personal reflections after the action was implemented. I used peer observation with the help of a fellow teacher who observed my class for about four sessions, after which he reflected on what he observed in the class.

As a result of the action plan carried out, the observations showed that the learners were able to practise reading the text — which was more culturally appropriate – more easily than the text we used before for reading practice purposes. I noticed that as time went by, they did not stop reading unfamiliar words, since these had already been pre-taught.

This was not only my observation. In the focus group, students explained that culturally appropriate texts are simple and more manageable.

Students indicated that the use of simplified vocabulary enabled them to read more easily, compared to vocabulary that was not simplified. In the observations, my colleague noticed that they seemed to enjoy using the vocabulary and would be seen to emphasise the words whenever they pronounced them. Furthermore, students were seen reading the texts that included simplified vocabulary and seemed to read for a longer time than before. Additionally, learners did the reading activities better when the cultural context was pre-taught than when this was not familiar to them. Most of the students indicated that the way the teacher presented the text – pre-teaching cultural context – was very useful (focus group interview).

Thanks to the actions I carried out, I was able to understand that the familiar cultural context of reading texts needs to be considered when preparing them. Culturally appropriate reading texts make practising reading active, simple and easy for the learners. I learned that we need to check the difficulty of the vocabulary we use in reading texts. If the vocabulary we use is difficult, it makes reading practice difficult. Reducing the number of unfamiliar words facilitates a better comprehension of a text. We should also be sure that the time we assign for reading practice is enough and appropriate. We need to know exactly how much is adequate. Before we let students practise reading, we must be sure that there are no situations or aspects which may make reading practice difficult.

From this exploratory action research, I learned that teachers are challenged with different difficulties in the class. The challenges may come from the texts we use – as happened to me – classroom management, students' motivation for learning and school management, among others. When teachers reflect on their daily activities, they can identify the problem and find a solution. Teachers need to reflect on their challenges and success in classroom teaching activities, and exploratory action research serves as a tool for that. It is cyclical and never stops. When a teacher conducts exploratory action research and fixes the problem in the class, this does not mean that the teacher should stop there, since we may find some other challenges needing to be fixed for better performance. If teachers reflect on their classroom activities, we improve and become more effective at what we do by identifying our weaknesses and strengths. Then we can work on these weaknesses for better performance and keep on improving on our strengths.