

EXTENSIVE READING: USING DIASPORA LITERATURE TO DEVELOP LEARNERS' READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English as ESL/EFL to non-native learners is a challenging task for any ESL/EFL teacher. The reason is simple, as learners are not getting any exposure to the target language, the acquisition of the same becomes a mammoth task. Language learners need exposure to the Target Language as much as possible both inside and outside the classroom. Classroom tasks usually focus more on intensive reading. However, growing an overall habit of reading is important for the learners. To encourage this extensive reading, teachers need to recommend materials that can captivate learners' interests. In terms of extensive reading, Literature has been a subject of study in many countries at a secondary or tertiary level, but until recently it has not been given much emphasis in the ESL/EFL classroom. Only since 1980s, this area has been attracting more ESL/EFL teachers. The purpose of this article is to look at some of the issues and ways in which literature can be exploited in the classroom. This paper suggests that Diaspora Literature rather than English Literature can well serve this purpose. This paper begins by defining the term 'Extensive Reading' elaborately. The term will also be compared with Intensive Reading, the commonly used practice in language classrooms. The keyword 'Diaspora Literature' is dealt with along with the cultural distance the learners face while learning a Second Language. Diaspora Literature provides the learners with the familiar setting which make them feel at home while learning the Target Language. This paper shows that learners' compatibility with Diaspora Literature has been a success and been proved by an Action Research in a Language classroom.

Key words: Diaspora Literature, Extensive Reading, Intensive Reading.

1.0 Introduction

The language planners' inconsistent attitudes towards teaching English in Bangladesh have made the standard of English really poor. 'Whether or not it is from such inconsistent language planning, the standard of the students' proficiency in English has been going down steadily over the years' (Quader 1998:57). In the context of Bangladesh, with large classrooms and emphasis on examinations, the majority of intermediate L2 learners lack competency in the four macro skills. Most of the learners have difficulties in pronunciation, understanding and writing. These learners are more into memorizing from the text. The reason behind their memorization is their failure in comprehending the reading materials. Their limitations make it difficult for them to communicate in English. Among the macro skills our focus is on the reading skills. This paper aims at dealing with an Action Research to find out the effects of introducing books/novels written by Diaspora writers. It is hoped that this paper will be an eye opener to ESL practitioners. The importance and problems of Extensive Reading would also be revealed through the literature review of some previous research. Despite the problems involved, the importance of Extensive Reading as a means of improving language proficiency is nonetheless undeniable.

The motivation of this paper is to introduce some contemporary works of Literature in English (by Diaspora Writers) which language learners might find not only interesting but a wonderful pastime as well. In fact, the paper emphasizes that since Diaspora Literature contains multicultural settings and tend to use easier English, learners of English Language would feel at home reading them. Hence, our hypothesis of this research is:

Diaspora Literature can fill the cultural gap in learners and accelerate their second language learning.

This paper delineates at first the methodology of the research paper, secondly deals with the literature review defining Intensive and Extensive Reading, and thirdly the benefits of Extensive Reading are elaborated. The next section gives an introduction and explanations of diaspora literature. In the same section it is mentioned how diaspora literature can be a means of extensive reading. Then the paper dwells upon the findings followed by the analysis of the research. In concluding segment the suggestions and recommendations have been provided.

1.1 Methodology

To address the above problem with our students of undergraduate level we ran an action research on how an introduction to Extensive Reading would help the learners to improve their command of reading.

Firstly, the action research was done with a group of 170 undergraduate students taking English Reading Skills course at a private university. These students were instructed to read a selected Diaspora novel within three months time i.e. within one semester in their Extensive Reading program. At the end of the semester the learners sat for a test based on the novel. After the test, the scores were studied to find out what number of students got high marks in the test.

Secondly, though our research focused on Extensive Reading and our aim was to show how we can incorporate Diaspora Literature into the Extensive Reading program to develop the students' reading comprehension, in order to see the difference between the students' understanding of English Literature and Diaspora Literature, we took a test in the Intensive Reading program of the class. In the Midterm test of the Intensive Reading Program we gave two sets of passages among which one was chosen from English Literature and the other from Diaspora Literature. The scores that the students obtained after answering the questions of the two passages were compared to find out where they got the higher marks i.e. which literature they understood better.

Finally, along with the above mentioned tests a set of questionnaire was provided to the students to find out the feedback of reading outside classroom. Besides, another set of questionnaire, was given to the ESL teachers working at different universities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intensive Reading:

This is a process for reading shorter texts in order to extract specific information. Grellet (1946: 4) terms it "an accuracy activity" that involves reading in details. Bright and McGregor (1970: 80) remark, "...it is not whole lessons but parts of lessons that may properly be so divided. In the middle of a chapter, we may stop to dwell on one word. This is intensive study."

Teachers may influence intensive reading because he is the part of the process, and it is largely a class room activity. It is sometimes termed *local* reading.

The aim of intensive reading, according to Nuttall (1996: 38), is...to arrive at an understanding, not only of what the text means, but of how the meaning is produced. The 'how' is as important as the 'what', for the intensive lesson is intended primarily to train strategies which the student can go on to use with other texts. Intensive reading is much effective for the development of the reading skills of students since "most of the reading skills are trained by studying shortest texts in detail" (Nuttall, 1996: 38). Barry (2002: 4) argues that intensive reading is more useful than extensive reading. He has advised that the students make their reading 'meditative, reflective, and personal'. He goes on to say that "nothing of any interest can happen in this subject ['English Studies'] without close reading." He has also suggested SQ3R method for the students to make intensive reading a success (SQ3R was introduced by Robinson, 1962, and it stands for Survey, Question, Reading, Reciting and Reviewing).

2.2 Extensive Reading:

Both intensive and extensive readings are important and necessary for effective readings, and they are complementary to each other. To be an efficient reader, one must carry on both these two processes, as Williams (1986: 44) suggests, "For every hour of intensive reading, a learner should be doing at least another hour of extensive reading." Davis (1995: 329) defines an extensive reading as-

...a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course, in which pupils are given the time, encouraged, and materials to read pleasurably, at their own level, as many books as are only competing against themselves.

As for extensive reading as an informal reading habit, it is something that the educated blend and stretch their formal-education-induced ER into their future lives for profit (in terms of gaining knowledge) alone or pleasure alone or both. (Lakshminarayanan, K. R. 2015)

A working definition of "extensive reading" as a language teaching/learning procedure is that it is reading (a) of large quantities of material or long texts; (b) for global or general understanding; (c) with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text.

Furthermore, because (d) reading is individualized, with students choosing the books they want to read, (e) the books are not discussed in class. (Susser, B. & Robb, N. T. 1990)

Evidence for the value of free voluntary reading, or recreational reading, continues to accumulate. In the last few decades, evidence from several areas continues to show that those who do more recreational reading show better development in reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. These results hold for first and second language acquisition, and for children and adults (Krashen, S. 2004).

Williams (1984: 10) describes extensive reading as the "relatively rapid reading of long texts." According to Nuttall (1996: 142), extensive reading, is essentially a private activity, and the reader dwells in his/her private world of reading for his/her own interest. Nuttall (op. cit.) has pointed out two reasons for extensive reading. The first reason is that extensive reading is the 'easiest and most effective' way of improving the reading skills of the students. The second reason is that being an educational

tool extensive reading not only serves a favourite climate for the students but also provides them with enjoyment. As a result, students feel interested, and they acquire desired progress while developing their reading skills.

However, the purpose of extensive reading is solely to enjoy a text, and in this reading programme students need not answer questions on the text they have read. Moreover, they can select their own books and read a great deal at their own pace. In order to make extensive reading really enjoyable and fruitful for the students, they should be encouraged to read easy and interesting books and to stop reading a book if it is too hard, too easy, or too boring (Day, 2004: 8).

According to Hafiz and Tudor (1989: 1-2), the goal of extensive reading is “to ‘flood’ learners with large quantities of L2 input with few or possibly no specific tasks to perform on this material.” Its importance lies in the fact that it helps to increase students’ vocabulary to a large extent (Nuttall: 62). Nation (1997) supports it, and explains that extensive reading increases students’ vocabulary knowledge because in an extensive reading students come across the same words repeatedly, and can pick up their meanings from the context. Day (2004: 10), the chair of the *Extensive Reading Foundation*, states that “Good things happen when EFL students read extensively.” He explains that extensive reading not only makes the students fluent readers, but also enables them to learn new words and expand their understanding of words they knew before. Extensive reading also helps them to write better, and “their listening and speaking abilities improve.” In short, extensive reading activities can make student’s reading a resource for language practice, vocabulary learning, listening, speaking and writing. As extensive reading is an open programme for all types of students and their choice is free, they can read any types of texts they like. All kinds of books, magazines, etc. especially written for EFL and ESL learners are the most suitable reading materials for them. Colin Davis (1995) has been involved in developing extensive reading programmes (ERPs) for eighteen years. He claims:
...experience has convinced me that extensive reading is a crucial adjunct to classroom teaching, in helping to expose pupils to far more 'good' English than, unassisted, the English teacher could ever hope to do—and that it can do this more enjoyably than most English lessons.

Studies on extensive reading report positive learner outcomes in reading, listening, speaking and writing, gains in motivation and expanded lexico-grammatical range (Day et al., 2011).

2.3 Benefits Of Extensive Reading Were Categorized By Davis Like This (Davis C. 1995):

Reading skills: Pupils were more positive about starting new texts. Their imaginative responses improved, as did their personal engagement with what they read. Their overall comprehension skills improved, and they found it easier to read on other subjects. Overall they came to see reading as a pleasurable, rather than a stressful activity.

Language skills: Pupils developed a wider active and passive vocabulary. They used more varied sentence structure, and were better at spotting and correcting grammatical mistakes in their writing and speaking. They showed an overall improvement in writing skills and increased confidence and fluency in speaking.

Personal growth: Pupils showed a more positive attitude to studying in general. They developed a wider knowledge of the world and an increased understanding of other people. They used thinking skills more effectively, their imaginative scope was enlarged, and they were generally more matured.

Examinations: Better results were obtained in all English-medium subjects.”

Extensive reading is believed to have considerable benefits for learners both in terms of learning gains and motivation and seems to be becoming ever more popular in the ELT world (Brown, D. 2009). Extensive reading has been proclaimed as, ‘the single most effective way to improve language proficiency’ (Maley 2005: 354 quoted in Brown). Extensive reading is thought to lead to considerable learning gains in the areas of reading, writing, vocabulary learning, and overall proficiency while also increasing motivation (Day and Bamford 1998. quoted in Brown). A substantial body of research has shown that extensive reading has considerable benefits. Day and Bamford summarize a number of investigations into the effects of extensive reading thus, ‘Students increased their reading ability in the target language, developed positive attitudes toward reading, had increased motivation to read, and made gains in various aspects of proficiency in the target language, including vocabulary and writing’ (Brown, D. 2009). Reviewing extensive reading, Davis concludes that: Any ESL, EFL or L1 classroom will be poorer for the lack of an extensive reading programme of some kind, and will be unable to promote its pupil’s language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a programme were present (Brown, D. 2009). Finally, Day and Bamford (2002) put forward the following ten principles for an extensive reading approach to teaching reading:

1. *The reading material is easy.*
2. *A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.*
3. *Learners choose what they want to read.*
4. *Learners read as much as possible.*
5. *The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.*
6. *Reading is its own reward.*
7. *Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.*
8. *Reading is individual and silent.*
9. *Teachers orient and guide their students.*
10. *The teacher is a role model of a reader.*

3.0 Diaspora Literature As Means Of Extensive Reading

Diaspora Literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. Basically Diaspora is a minority community living in exile. "The notion of diaspora", as mentioned by Cambridge Scholars (2008), "in particular has been productive in its attention to the real-life movement of people throughout the world, whether these migrations have been through choice or compulsion." There lies a difficulty in coming to terms with diaspora, and as such it introduces conceptual categories to display the variety of meanings the word invokes. Robin Cohen (1997) classifies Diaspora as:

1. Victim Diasporas
2. Labour Diasporas
3. Imperial Diasporas
4. Trade Diasporas
5. Homeland Diasporas
6. Cultural Diasporas

The author finds a common element in all forms of Diaspora; these are people who live outside their 'natal (or imagined natal) territories' and recognize that their traditional homelands are reflected deeply in the languages they speak, religion they adopt, and Cultures they produce (Cohen, 1997). Though in the age of technological advancement which has made the traveling easier and the distance shorter the term Diaspora has lost its original connotation, yet simultaneously it has emerged in another form healthier than the former. At first, it is concerned with human beings attached to their homelands. Their sense of yearning for the homeland, a curious attachment to its traditions, religions and languages give birth to diaspora literature which is primarily concerned with the individual's or community's attachment to the homeland.

The diasporian authors engage in cultural transmission that is equitably exchanged in the manner of translating a map of reality for multiple readerships. Besides, they are equipped with bundles of memories and articulate an amalgam of global and national strands that embody real and imagined experience (Singh, S 2008).

3.1 Culture Presented In Diaspora Literature And Learning A Second Language

Culture is a highly complex phenomenon. Kramsch (1998) describes culture as "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings" (p. 10). Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler (2003) define culture as a complex system of concepts, attitudes, values, beliefs, conventions, behaviours, practices, rituals and lifestyles of the people who make up a cultural group, as well as the artefacts they produce and the institutions they create. (p. 45)

Language and culture have an inextricable and interdependent relationship. Mitchell and Myles (2004) argue that "language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other" (p. 235). This relationship can be reflected in terms such as *linguaculture* (Friedrich, 1989), *linguaculture* (Risager, 2005) *language-and-culture* (Liddicoat et al., 2003) or *culturelanguage* (Papademetre & Scarino, 2006). Liddicoat et al. (2003) also claim that language and culture interact with each other in a way that culture connects to all levels of language use and structures; i.e. there is no level of language which is independent of culture. Moreover, the fact that language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality clearly shows that language and culture are bounded together (Kramsch, 1998). The relationship between language and culture is made meaningful in language learning as "the person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool" (Bennett, Bennett & Allen, 2003, p. 237).

Different people have expressed their opinions regarding the role of culture in language class. Phyak, P has collected four such opinions from various personnel in his article *Integrating Local Culture in the EFL Context of Nepal: An Ignored Agenda?* The first view expressed by Byram and Flemming (Byram, 1997; Byram and Fleming, 1998) states that the target language culture should be taught in ELT in order to help learners to acculturate into the culture of English countries. The second view expressed by Kachru, Nelson and Canagaraja (Kachru, 1986; Kachru and Nelson, 1996; Canagarajah, 1999) opines that there is no need of teaching target culture especially in the contexts where different institutionalized varieties of English are in practice. Similarly, the third view by Kramsch and Sullivan (Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996) states plainly that 'local culture' in TEFL should be taught. Finally, the fourth view by Alptekin, Jenkins and Seidlhofer (Alptekin, 2005; Jenkins, 2005; Seidlhofer, 2001) says that since English is a lingua franca, it should be taught in a culture-free context. In the same article Phyak gives a fifth opinion regarding the use of culture in language class by assimilating the highlights of the above opinions where he advises the teachers to use both target and native cultures with priority to local culture (Phyak, P, 2010).

Whatever the views of applied linguists all over the world, we cannot disregard two core realities. The first is that while learning a second language, the influence of the culture of that language is inevitable. The second fact is that the learner of second language comes equipped with the culture of the first language. If no association is made between the culture of the first language and the learning of the second one, the learning will not much effective. Therefore, inclusion of local culture and context should be more prominent in the initial phases and gradually gear more towards the target culture so that the integration is seamless in the end and language skill transition is more comprehensive. (Mabindra Regmi).

Fulfilling cultural gap in learners is a hard task for any ESL teacher. So the Hypothesis for the research is:
Diaspora literature can fill the cultural gap in learners and accelerate their second language learning.

4.0 Findings

Fig. 1 Scores of Beyond Words by a Native Writer (Mid-Term test)

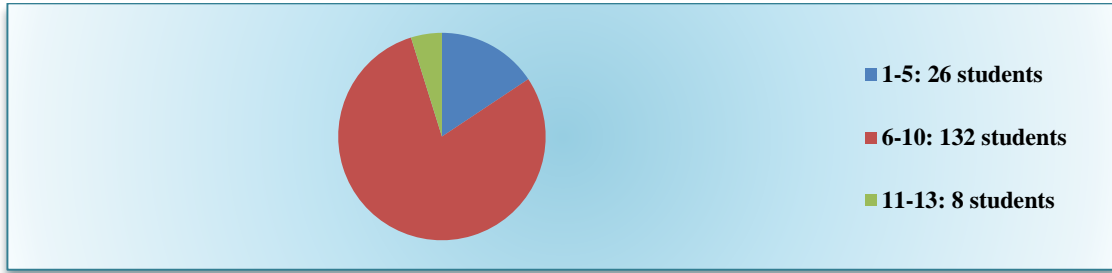


Fig. 2 Scores of Bricklane by a Diaspora Writer (Mid-Term test)

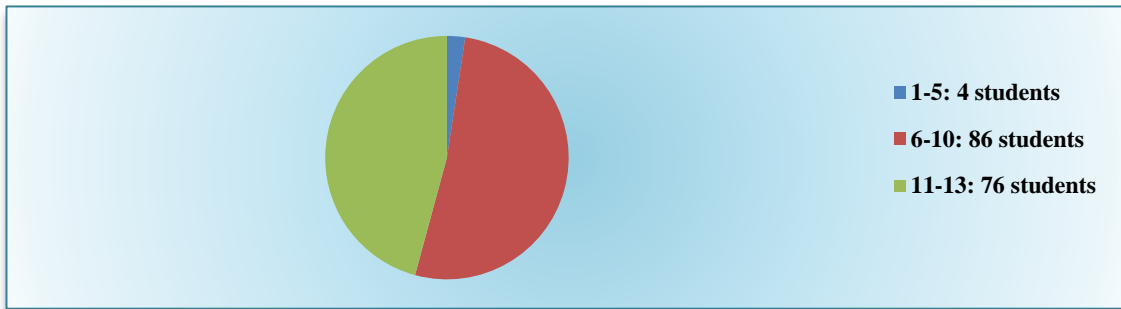


Fig. 3 Beyond Words Vs Bricklane (Mid-Term Test)

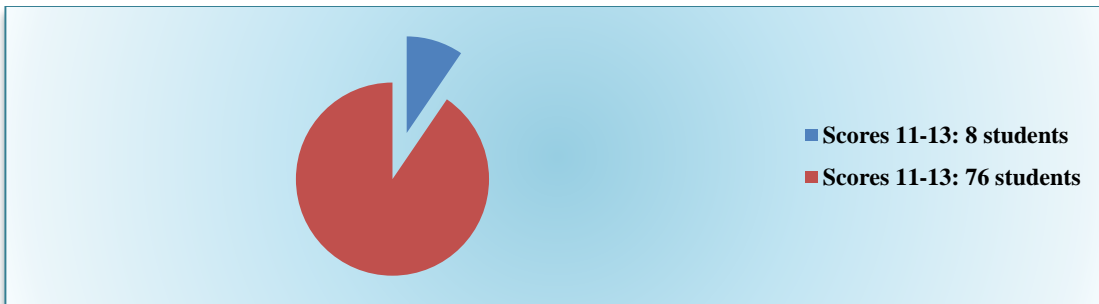


Fig. 4 Scores on Jhumpa Lahiri's novels (extensive reading program quiz)



4.1 Analysis

During our research we took two different tests, one in the intensive reading program (Mid-Term Test) and the other test in the extensive reading program. In the intensive reading program a test was taken with the aim to find whether our hypothesis that reading Diaspora literature can fill the cultural gap in learners and accelerate their reading comprehension skills. In the extensive reading program there was a quiz to find whether the allotted Diaspora novels (*Namesake* and/or *The Interpretations of Maladies* by *Jhumpa Lahiri*) had been read and comprehended.

In the Midterm Examination two passages were included. Among the passages one was written by a native English author (Beyond Words) while the other was taken from a Diaspora novel (*Brick Lane* by Monica Ali). (Fig.1 & 2) 166 students participated in the examination. The total marks of each passage were 13. The scores obtained were divided into three categories; they were 1-5, 6-10 and 11-13. After the scrutiny of the Midterm Examination the results showed that in the first passage (Beyond Words) 26 students scored 1-5, 132 students scored 6-10 and 8 students scored 11-13. In the second passage (*Brick Lane*) 4 students scored 1-5, 86 students scored 6-10 and 76 students scored 11-13. Thus when the scores of the two passages are compared it shows that 68 more students scored in the highest category of 11-13 in the passage of *Brick Lane* (Fig.3). The obtainment of this greater score therefore proves that students understood the extract of Diaspora literature better than the extract of native English Literature. We can then conclude by saying that our hypothesis has been proved to be positive.

In the Extensive Reading program the total marks of the quiz were 10 (Fig.4). The scores obtained were divided into two categories; they were 1-5 and 6-10. After the completion of the quiz, we found that among 155 students, who attended the quiz, 26 students scored 1-5 and 129 students scored 6-10. The results of the quiz thus show that a greater number of students read the novels and understood well.

4.2 Conclusion

At the end the hypothesis that Diaspora Literature can fill the cultural gap in learners and accelerate their second language learning has been proved. Surely the reading extracts taken from Diaspora Literature had been a context where the learners found a familiar setting, people, customs, and cultures. This familiarity indeed enabled them to learn the target language at a homely setting and they learned it without any intimidation. Due to the positive result of the Action Research it is thus suggested that Diaspora Literature should be introduced in the Extensive Reading programs of a Reading Skills course. It is also suggested that learners would find the setting of the writing more familiar and the purpose the program would be even more successful if the Diaspora reading material is chosen according to the region or continent. Thus it would be preferable for the South Asian students to go through the reading materials written by the South Asian Diasporic writers or an African learner to go through materials written by African Diasporic writers. This practice would help improve the students' reading comprehension further. It is hoped that this paper will be an eye opener to ESL practitioners.

The only limitation of this Action Research is the unavailability of the Diaspora Literature materials for teachers and learners in rural areas of Bangladesh. Thus if any teacher has a plan to incorporate any Diaspora Novel in his course plan, he should make sure at first that the Diaspora reading material must be available for the learners.

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