

An Action Research on Promoting Extensive Reading

Yahya Omar
(Jabatan Bahasa Inggeris)

Surayah Zaidon
(Jabatan Ilmu Pendidikan)

ABSTRACT

Reading is an important skill as it will affect students performance in all other language skills. This action research aims to cultivate a reading habit in English. Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) programme is the tool used to materialise this objective. The research samples are 20 students from a class in the Program Persediaan Ijazah Sarjana Muda Pendidikan (PPISMP). This research is divided into two phases whereby USSR is introduced in the second phase. Findings reveal that USSR is an effective measure that can promote reading among students.

ABSTRAK

Kemahiran membaca adalah penting kerana ianya memberi kesan kepada kemahiran-kemahiran bahasa yang lain. Kajian tindakan ini bertujuan menggalakkan tabiat membaca di dalam Bahasa Inggeris menggunakan program *Uninterrupted Sustain Silent Reading* (USSR). Sampel kajian adalah 20 orang pelajar dari satu kelas Program Persediaan Ijazah Sarjana Muda Pendidikan (PPISMP). Kajian ini dibahagikan kepada dua fasa di mana di dalam fasa kedua USSR telah dijalankan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan USSR merupakan satu cara yang berkesan untuk menggalakkan tabiat membaca dalam kalangan pelajar.

INTRODUCTION

The best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it. (Nuttall, 1989. pg. 128)

Reading opens the mind of an individual as it allows vast opportunities of gaining knowledge. To do so a reader can put himself or herself in a place or time without getting into any time machine. It is of utmost importance that students read well in order to put himself or herself at a higher academic level or to advance into a new

stage. Needless to say reading is indeed an important skill to be mastered as it contributes to student's excellence in their studies.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Reading is the ability of an individual to recognize a visual form, associate the form with a sound and/or meaning acquired in the past, and, on the basis of past experience, understand and interpret its meaning. However, there is no single set of definition for reading (Rubin, 1992, Kennedy, 1981.) It all depends on how a reader interprets it. Reading can be just the sounding/verbalizing of words found on a page without understanding the meaning of the printed words . This can be due to a person's strong feelings that are interfering with his ability to get the author's message. Or a person is able to bring her background experience to the material and extract the author's message. As reading has no definite definition, it suffices to say that reading is a process rather than a skill. This term is associated with habits or drills that need to be taught or implemented in order to promote reading independently. This in turn will improve a person's proficiency in the language.

Reading is an important skill as it will affect students' performance in all other language skills namely listening, speaking and writing. The inability to be an independent reader hinders student performance and thus makes the English lesson a dreadful 60 minutes of learning.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

As English lecturers, we notice that our students face a number of problems that are significantly shown through their production of the English language either in their written assignments or their speaking ability. In their written assignments, there are many lexical and semantic mistakes that interfere with the message that they are trying to convey. This evidently reveals their limited vocabulary. In terms of speaking, it can be clearly seen that students are persistently not able to communicate their ideas as they do not know the words that they should use. Apart from problems due to their limited vocabulary, we also notice that students face problems in generating, exploring and explaining ideas. Hence, these problems lead us to believe that our students are not doing enough independent reading.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This research aims to cultivate a reading habit in English among our students. We have chosen Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading programme (USSR) as the tool to materialize this objective. Researches have shown that the programme is a practical method to be implemented in promoting extensive reading among students (Grabe

1991; Richards 1998). We hoped that in the long run this can help to increase the number of independent readers among the PPISMP students.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Does Uninterrupted Sustain Silent Reading (USSR) help to cultivate a reading habit in English among the PPISMP students?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This action research is divided into two phases. Each phase is carried out for a two month period. In the first phase the students are asked to record the number of books read throughout the two months in a Reader's List (Appendix 1). In the second phase the treatment i.e. Uninterrupted Sustain Silent Reading (USSR) is introduced. Again they are asked to record their readings in the Reader's List. Students are given the freedom to choose their own English books to read.

At the end of the second phase the students are to answer questionnaire with regard to the programme they have participated. The questions are structured and mostly open ended. The number of books read in the two phases and the questionnaire are later analysed in order to answer the research question.

The research samples are 20 students from a class in the Program Persediaan Ijazah Sarjana Muda Pendidikan (PPISMP). All students are in the first semester of the programme. The students are not English majors and their English proficiency is average. On average their SPM English results is B. They attend four hours of English class weekly. In each English class, 10 minutes are allotted for USSR before their actual English lesson begins.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive reading is the process of rapidly reading book after book in which a reader's attention is on the meaning and not the language of the text (Richards 1998). Following this concept the text is read for real-world purposes i.e pleasure and gaining information. Today, extensive reading, in language-teaching terms, is recognized as one of the four styles or ways of reading, the other three being skimming, scanning and intensive reading (Richards 1998).

Extensive reading for a sustained, uninterrupted period of time is not only valuable for developing vocabulary but is also to develop reading proficiency and language acquisition in general (Grabe 1991, Krashen 1993). Teachers have

implemented this programme around the globe for nearly three decades because of its benefits. The programme means putting down a book you don't like and choose another instead. It is the kind of reading highly literate people does obsessively all the time (Krashen 1993).

Extensive reading aims to get students reading in the second language and liking it. According to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistic, it is intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading" (Richards, Platt & Platt 1992). To implement extensive reading in the classroom, at least 10 minutes of uninterrupted, sustained silent reading is set aside for students and teachers to read individually anything they wish to before the actual class begins. This programme has been given the acronym USSR. The objective of this reading programme is to enable students to enjoy reading and to read without help unfamiliar text, at appropriate speed, silently and with adequate understanding.

The phrase "to enable students" means to promote the ability of students to read. In this program, it is what the reader does that counts and not what the teacher does. "To enjoy" is regarded as students able to enjoy and appreciate reading a book. To do this, it is very important that books available are interesting for students. Not many are willing to help students read outside the classroom. So in this program, it is hoped that at a certain point, students will be able "to read without help". Teacher will help initially but gradually the support will be unnecessary. "Unfamiliar text" will come at the later stage of this program. The program will focus more on familiar text first as to activate background knowledge (schemata theory) This program also aims to increase student's speed in reading. However, the increase in speed should not affect the understanding of the text. It will be more appropriate if students can read at different speeds for different purposes. Since this program is called USSR, it will be appropriate to read "silently". Here we are not saying that reading aloud is abandoned, but we tend to read silently more in the real situation and in the real world. Finally, "with adequate understanding" means that it is not a must to understand every word in the text. Meaning making is more important in this programme (Nuttall 1989 pg. 31-32). Characteristics of this reading programme according to Richards (1998) are:

1. Students read as much as possible.
2. A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available.
3. Students select what they want to read and have the freedom to stop reading if material that fails to interest them.
4. The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
5. Reading is its own reward. There are few or no follow-up exercises.
6. Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students in terms of vocabulary and grammar.

7. Reading is individual and silent.
8. Reading speed is usually faster than slower as students read books that they find easily understandable.
9. The teacher is a role model of a reader for students. He reads together with the students.

As this is an extensive reading program, it will focus more towards the 'top down' theory. Top down theory avoids systematic phonic teaching, and focuses on reading for meaning. Students are assumed to acquire their word attack skill incidentally. Aebersold and Field (2001) state that the text is always read for comprehension of main idea and not for every detail and words. This approach advocates a natural language or 'whole language' teaching. We want students to use the language to derive meaning from the text. The meaning is central and any new language item learnt is an incidental benefit. This is opposite to a language lesson where we focus on vocabulary or structure (Nuttall 1989). This correlates with the learning is meaning making theory and construction of meaning. (Piaget 1971) basic to this principle is the notion that learning most often proceeds from whole to parts to whole. It is the wholeness that gives meaning to our experience and to our learning.

Extensive reading increases general second language competence and according to Grabe (1991) longer concentrated periods of silent reading build vocabulary and structural awareness, develop automaticity, enhance background knowledge, improve comprehension skills, and promote confidence and motivation in second language learning.

Student's initial successful experiences in USSR result in the discovery that they can read in the second language and that it is rewarding and pleasurable. This stimulates the development of positive attitudes toward reading in the second language and the growth of motivation to read in the second language. These positive beginning experiences result in greater gains in reading ability and positive attitudes, and an increase in motivation and enjoyment (Rirchards 1998).

FINDINGS

Reader's List Phase One

In the first phase of this study, it is found that our initial assumptions are not baseless. The students do not do enough independent reading in English on their own. The table below shows the data from the Reader's List in the first phase of this study.

Table 1 clearly shows that very few of the students do any reading in English on their own. In September 2006 only one (5%) student read an English book.

Although in October there is an increase of another reader, which contributes to 10% of the class, with an increase of the books read to three, the result is still discouraging. For both months, the average number of books read per reader is less than 1. Indeed this is an alarming result.

Table 1 Books Read before USSR

Month	No. of Books Read	No. of Readers		Average no. of Books Read Per Reader
		(N=20)	%	
September 2006	1	1	5	0.05
October 2006	3	2	10	0.15

Phase Two

Table 2 shows the results of this study during the USSR programme. In the first month, all students read books in English and the total number of books read is 44. This is an average of 2.2 books read per student.

Table 2 Books Read during USSR

Month	No. of Books read	No. of Readers		Average no. of Books Read Per Reader
		(N=20)	%	
January 2007	44	20	100	2.2
February 2007	38	20	100	1.9

In the following month although all students continues to read, the number of books read drops to 38. Thus, the average number of books read per student drops to 1.9. Although there is a slight drop in the number of books read, the fact that all students continue reading is very encouraging. This shows that the USSR programme does work in promoting independent reading among the students.

Questionnaire

Based on the question, “Are you a better reader after the programme?”, the majority of participants responded positively. When asked to state why they liked the programme,

the responses were free to choose what to read (100%), ‘not tested’ (85%) and everybody (students and lecturer) are reading (80%). This correlates with Deci and Ryan’s (1985) theory of self-determination and intrinsic motivation, where children natural curiosity energizes their desire to learn. The self-determination theory suggests that children are motivated when they have a choice and ownership of what they read. Therefore, providing children with an opportunity to select reading materials promotes their literacy development because get to select books that interest them. ‘Not only do students read more, but experience with a variety of informative materials help them to develop a greater respect for the use and value of reading in school’ (Kennedy, 1981). In addition, the statement above reinforces the answer given by the participants as they are very happy with the time given to them for reading. One of the responses was that the time given was like a transition period to get ready for English lesson mentally and physically.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Human behavior is learned in part by observation and imitation (Bandura, 1986). For students, a given role model, modelled by parents, teachers or peers may facilitate their learning of it. Gambrell (1999) stated that students need to see that we value reading and that reading is important in our lives. Share with your students. What better way to show them that reading is important”. Findings demonstrate that a teacher’s role plays a crucial role in fostering children’s reading attitude. So it is important here that the teacher must also read a book when implementing this program. Collins(1980) comments that ‘if a valued person is observed at least occasionally to be functionally engaged in reading, then the probability of independent reading is increased.

Non-accountability is also a characteristic of USSR. Accountability is where reading is highly graded. This is where students are required do submit records, journals or book report for assessment. However, for this program the accountability is rather low as a guide for teacher to ensure that reading is taking place. “Testing extensive reading can be even damaging if it makes students read less freely or pleasurable. USSR is a program that focuses on personal reading development and not assessment for result. If it is thought important to measure students progress in extensive reading, a simple record of each students of the number of books read, and at which level, is more appropriate” (Nuttall 1989 pg 218). For this program, as a guide for teachers, students’ assessment is observed when students develop their own reading speed, reading level and understanding of the text. Here it is hoped since no formal assessment is conducted, students will commit themselves to the reading programme honestly.

As most of the books selected are within student’s knowledge and level, theory of prior knowledge ensure that learning will take place. Prior knowledge is the foundation upon which new meaning is built. This will link to new ideas, skills and

competencies. This happens when students personally choose the book they like and books that students have prior knowledge of. Assigned reading given to students might discourage students from reading the assigned text due to lack of prior knowledge. Learners learn best when they are interested and involved. Since students personally choose the book they like, it should interest them and they will be involved in the reading. The goal of a successful programme should be the development of readers who can read and who choose to read. In short, extensive reading together with USSR will give students more freedom to choose reading materials that interest them and more responsibility in finding materials within their proficiency range. (Aebersold & Field, 2001)

This action research reveals that our students need to be encouraged to read independently in English. USSR has proven to be an effective immediate measure that can promote reading among them. Therefore, this programme should be continued as it may help to cultivate reading habit among students and this in turn will contribute to an increase in the students' proficiency in English.

CONCLUSION

Reading plays an important role in one's life. It is an active skill-based process of constructing meaning and gaining knowledge from a text. It is an important skill to acquire as it not only brings a person to a greater height in his life, but it also develops one's personal fulfillment. The importance of reading to students cannot be stressed enough. Teachers/ lecturers must encourage and find ways to ensure that students acquire this skill so that they will one day become independent readers.

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