

The importance of reading for pleasure: feeling a sense of connectedness with others

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ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS

Have you ever felt a natural affinity with someone's anecdote? This is exactly what happened to me at Louise Potter's plenary talk at the BRAZ-TESOL Intercultural Language Education (ILE) SIG event called Bringing Literature and Culture into the ELT Classroom held on 16 May, 2021. Louise's account of reading specific books in her childhood struck a chord with me because it transported me back to my own youth. The book covers she showed were vivid in my memory. In fact, I could even picture myself turning the pages and catching a whiff of the sweet, earthy smell of these treasures. We share similar memories as we were brought up in the UK around the same time.

READING FOR PLEASURE

After the event, Louise and I talked further about the importance of connecting with people and evoking fond memories of books to perhaps stimulate reading for pleasure in adulthood. We were particularly interested in finding out language teachers' experiences of reading for pleasure and how they encourage their students to read. We researched the topic further and found the following definition for "reading for

pleasure" given by the National Literacy Trust: "[it is] reading that we do of our own free will, anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading. It also refers to reading that, having begun at someone else's request, we continue because we are interested in it" (Clark and Rumbold, National Literacy Trust, 2006).

In language learning, reading is fundamental to build up vocabulary, recognise grammatical structures, and learn about other cultures empowering empathy, among other aspects. Motivation also plays a key role in reading as L2 readers may face a number of hurdles, such as having less experience to reading exposure in another language; their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and discourse structure is more limited; and L2 readers will experience transfer effects such as strategies, goals and expectations which may involve interference from the L1 (Grabe, 2014). Furthermore, self-concept (the value learners give to reading), choice (allowing learners to select what they read), time spent talking about books (engaging in small group discussions) and types of text available (variety of printed materials) are all important factors that encourage students to read (Gambrell et al., 2009). Therefore, content in the target language

needs to be captivating to a learner so that they will continue reading at their own free will, and experiences shared with others who have read the same material, can be stimulating.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Based on our discussion, we decided to draw up an online informal questionnaire and ask language teachers their thoughts on their own experiences of reading for pleasure and how they engage their students in this practice. The questionnaire was sent to our own contacts via e-mail and Facebook as a Google form. A total of 32 language teachers replied to the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of the following questions:

- What triggers you to pick up a book and read it nowadays?
- Have you ever felt a deep connection to someone else because of the same book(s) you have both read? Describe this connection.
- Have you ever discussed books amongst friends or peers? What did you gain from this experience?
- Can you think of a book you read that connected to your own life experiences?
- Why was it important to you? What was it about? How did it make you feel?
- How do you encourage your students to read for pleasure?
- What is the role of literature in the English language classroom?
- What do you expect to accomplish by asking your students to read?

RESULTS

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING

Firstly, a salient point we found out was that 53% of our interviewees' main focus for reading is related to immersing themselves in different worlds in order to get in touch with their feelings

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by being captured by an interesting plot or engaging writer. Furthermore, 12% expressed that they pick up a book if it is recommended by someone. The results also showed that 18% are encouraged to pick up books to learn something whether it is related or not to work and 3% stated that there is no time to read long books these days. When asked if they had ever felt a deep connection with someone else because of the same book(s) they had both read, 75% responded affirmatively. Interestingly, 97% said that they had discussed books amongst friends or peers. When asked about what they had gained from this experience, a third of those who answered the questionnaire stated that they had obtained insights, new perspectives and took on board different points of view from their colleagues.

Moreover, 90% of the respondents were able to think of a book they had read that had connected to their own life experiences. There were many comments about why a particular book was important to them and how it made them feel. For instance, some people mentioned that they identified with the characters in the book for a wide range of reasons from “*strong coming-of-age feelings*” to “*feeling at home*”.

FEELING CONNECTED

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, people have been confined to their homes, and reading groups, which were once face-to-face, moved

online to Zoom, Twitter and Instagram. The Internet has brought readers together, allowing them to connect with each other using a different media. There was an enormous boom in online book clubs. We actually took part in three different book clubs during the lockdown, two of which were focused on reading for academic purposes and one related to reading for pleasure. As we found out while reading the answers to our questionnaire, sharing reading experiences, whether face-to-face or online or amongst strangers or friends, creates a sense of belonging and connectedness. One interviewee said *"I have found that similar tastes in books and other forms of art create bonds with strangers and strengthen those with friends and acquaintances. Being able to talk about books amidst the chaos that is today's world is a real blessing."*

An interesting aspect that some teachers pointed out when sharing and discussing ideas with strangers or friends about books they have read is that they believe they have a better understanding of people as they are given new perspectives of the text, and consequently, a deeper understanding of the nuances of the book. For instance, one person expressed the following *"We started talking about the book, we shared different points of view and it was an amazing experience and we found out more about each other"*. This perhaps implies that this person was able to perceive how others feel about the same

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issue and, regardless of agreeing or disagreeing, felt connected.

Connectedness brings us to another delightful aspect of why we should encourage our students to read: while reading intriguing plots, readers may identify themselves with the characters. According to some answers from our questionnaire, some of the interviewees expressed that it is great to know that one is not alone in this world as we may identify with a character in a book. For example, this person stated *"One realizes that ordinary people just like us can thrive and succeed in life or can overcome difficulties one may have. There's this feeling of seeing yourself in the character and even when this is not so apparent or clear, you can get motivated or encouraged to move on."* Sometimes books can be life changers.

THE ROLE OF READING FOR PLEASURE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Although some teachers see books as ways to specifically introduce new vocabulary, practice new grammar, and develop language technically, according to most of the teachers who answered the questionnaire, the main role is to open doors to learning about cultures and understanding people around the world, their habits, their feelings, and our role in the society we live in. One of the teachers said in the questionnaire that *"It goes beyond exposing students to the language. It has to do with learning about life from stories. It has the role of enriching one's life culturally."*

The vast majority of the teachers expressed that to encourage their students to read more, they recommend books they like, read out extracts from a book, and prepare them beforehand to predict the plot, the characters and the historical period. Furthermore, five people said they let their students decide what they want to read.

Regarding the role of literature in the English language classroom, one person summed up many of the teachers' views by saying "*Literature puts the language in context and makes students realize how beautiful, artistic, and meaningful it can be*". Finally, when probed about what they expect to accomplish by asking their students to read, answers showed that teachers were a vehicle in terms of "*helping them to find something they are passionate about*", and that "*reading helps them to write better*".

IDEAS AND STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS TO EMBRACE LITERATURE IN THE CLASSROOM

Taking all this into account, we came up with some ideas and strategies to help students and teachers develop their reading practices:

- Revive libraries (inside schools). The kinaesthetic part of touching a book, lending/giving it to someone else is important (subject to pandemic restrictions)
- Create a fridge library (gelateca): Encourage students to bring in books they do not read anymore to exchange with other students to create a book loving community. Use an old fridge as the library.
- Set up book clubs, reading groups, literature circles so students and teachers can share their reading experiences.
- Introduce storytelling in the classroom: Enthusiastically entice students by telling them about the plots, the characters, the writers, the historical period the story takes place, etc.
- Take a field trip. This is another way to make reading a social event. Visit your local library, a university library or a bookstore.
- Play short passages of audio books. Although students are not developing decoding or fluency skills, they are acquiring vocabulary and applying comprehension strategies.
- Reenact your student's favorite books. Ask students to create a movie version of their favorite book or put on a play.
- Make connections between reading and world issues. Encourage students to compare plots and characters to real happenings and people around them.

There is no one right way to successfully inspire students to be avid readers but establishing a strong classroom culture of reading is definitely an important first step.

Literature has the power of bringing people together. It connects us to the world and expands our understanding of how it works, whether interculturally or engaging in imaginative and magical thinking. Dowd (1992) argues that "...from reading, hearing, and using culturally diverse materials, young people learn that beneath surface differences of color, culture or ethnicity, all people experience universal feelings of love, sadness, self-worth, justice and kindness." (p. 220).

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all the individuals who answered the questionnaire. 🌍

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