

Reading for pleasure?

Motivating EAL learners

Verity Cole sets out to find ways to get her teenage learners to read more.

My motivation for embarking on a programme of action research on extensive reading was a feeling of frustration at my students' lack of motivation to read outside class.

The benefits of extensive reading on students' language acquisition have been widely researched, as Timothy Bell helpfully summarises in his article for the *TESL* journal (1998):

1. It can provide 'comprehensible input'.

Krashen (1982: 165) argues that provided that the students are interested in the material, they have adequate exposure to language within their comprehension and they are reading for pleasure in a relaxed, tension-free environment, they are likely to acquire language.

2. It can enhance word recognition and reading comprehension skills.

Grabe (1991: 391) and Paran (1996: 30) have emphasised the importance of extensive reading in providing learners with practice in automaticity of word recognition and decoding the symbols on the printed page.

3. It increases the learners' exposure to language.
4. It aids the development of prediction skills.
5. It can consolidate previously learned language.
6. It can increase learners' knowledge of vocabulary.
7. It can lead to an improvement in writing.
8. It helps to build confidence with extended texts.

9. It encourages the exploitation of textual redundancy (Bell, 1998: 3).
10. It motivates learners to read more.

Unfortunately, my students were not to be convinced by academic research. The Reconnaissance phase of my action research therefore aimed to explore the reasons behind my learners' disinclination to read. It also sought to identify factors that my learners felt would motivate them to read more.

I structured the Reconnaissance phase by giving each student a questionnaire. Their answers were discussed in a follow-up interview. Having collated the results, I was surprised to learn that:

- Out of the 17 students interviewed, more students read for pleasure than I expected (13* versus 4).
- But of these students, *4 of the students who read for pleasure only read in their first language (Chinese).
- 3 of the students only read in English.
- 6 of the students read in both Chinese and English.

I wasn't so surprised to find out that:

- 4 students with the lowest level of proficiency in English are reluctant readers and were worried about difficult language and embarrassed about their reading level.

I also learned that none of my students read graded readers. Further investigation revealed that many didn't know what a graded reader was but were willing to 'have a go' at reading

one. There were four students who weren't keen, and coincidentally, they were the stronger, more enthusiastic readers. Their responses were:

- I couldn't find books I like or the topics I'm interested in the range of graded readers.
- I don't like reading graded readers because they aren't enough of a challenge for me.
- I don't like to be divided into a group which tells everyone what level I am.

So, it seems that a concern about level and 'losing face' is a factor in students' disinclination to choose graded readers. So too is a perceived limitation of story choice: many of my keen readers tend to read 'young adult' literature and are attracted to high profile, best-selling contemporary novels such as *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Twilight*. In contrast, many of the graded readers on offer from major publishers at higher levels are adapted classics.

Given that the majority of students had expressed a willingness to 'try' graded readers, I decided that they would choose from the complete range of Oxford University Press' bookworm readers delivered through RM Books™. RM Books™ is a system for schools which allows teachers to 'rent' eBooks out to students for a set number of weeks. My reasons for opting for this particular publisher and programme were as follows:

Practical

- Students were used to using iPads to complete work in and out of class.

- Oxford University Press offers a digital reading level test which directs learners to the appropriate level of their graded readers.
- RM Books' programme allows the teacher to monitor learners' reading progress.

Pedagogical

- Graded eBooks would address reluctant readers' fears that the language in fictional books is too difficult and would also avoid them losing face, as the level of the book would be invisible to others.
- A study carried out by the National Literacy Trust in December 2015 on the Impact of eBooks on the Reading Motivation of Children and Young

People in schools found that students who read using RM Books made more progress and enjoyed reading more.

- Learners can access and complete exercises electronically, adjust screen settings, look up words in a linked dictionary and make notes on screen.
- Teachers can create and embed materials in the books.

The stronger, enthusiastic readers who had an aversion to graded readers were given a choice of Macmillan's Literature Collection, which are short stories specifically designed to bridge the gap between graded readers and novels written for native English speakers.

When I met up with the students three weeks later, a couple of them still had

reservations about graded readers and reading in general. However, 16 said that they had 'quite' enjoyed their first graded reader experience. See Table 1 for the reasons they gave for doing so.

It has to be said that the students' enthusiasm for graded readers wasn't overwhelming, but this was hardly surprising given their initial reluctance to read them. What I was taken aback by was their strongly expressed opposition to reading extensively on iPads. Only one out of seventeen students preferred reading on iPads to print books. Table 2 shows the range of reasons they gave.

Although teenagers are often portrayed as 'digital natives' or 'screenagers', it seemed that these stereotypes do not hold true when it comes to so-called reading for pleasure. The majority of students read just before going to sleep and found a print book very much more relaxing than reading on their iPads. What's more, I was surprised to learn that only one or two students owned Kindles and these were not charged!

As I had drawn this conclusion after students had read just one eBook, I might have abandoned the scheme there and then, had the school not been financially committed to three eBooks for each student. I also had a suspicion that the students' aversion to reading eBooks might be due to their dislike of change. For these reasons, I asked my students to select another eBook from RM Books. This time, I planned to test whether a factor that my learners had identified as motivating them to read more was true in practice. This factor was:

- having the opportunity to learn more vocabulary through reading.

The majority of graded readers come with activities, some of which focus on the teaching of potentially unknown vocabulary and some on detailed comprehension. Completing these activities represented one opportunity for my learners to extend their lexical range.

Disappointingly, only one student found the exercises that come with the book useful and even then, she felt that there were too many exercises and

I enjoyed reading the book because	Number of students
it wasn't too difficult. (I didn't like the story much though.)	3
I like the unexpected endings of the Macmillan Readers.	3
I like the genre.	3
I like the subject matter.	2
I like short stories, easy to digest without interruption.	1
I've seen the book/musical so 'understand' the story and can ignore the vocabulary I don't understand.	1
I love all the small details and what they told you about the characters.	1
Yes: Story is quite fun, liked the characters.	2

Table 1

	Number of students
I like the feel of a book.	6
Reading a print book helps me get into the story more easily.	1
Reading on an iPad is bad for my eyes.	5
I find an iPad heavy to hold.	1
My iPad is a 'pain': need to sign in to RM Books, book sometimes takes ages to load, iPad needs charging.	5
eBooks don't feel 'real'.	1
I get more of a sense of progress and achievement from print books.	2
Reading on an iPad 'sucks the joy out of reading'.	1
Reading on an iPad distracts me; I'm tempted to look at other things.	1
I'm 'used to' a print book, I like the familiarity.	1

Table 2

it was difficult to be selective about which ones to do. Other, more negative comments went along the lines of 'It feels like I'm doing work, not reading for pleasure' and 'The exercises seem irrelevant, particularly the ones I have to do after I finish the story.' Students also made it clear that they didn't feel the need to focus a great deal of time or attention on recording new words. They were more interested in focusing on the storyline.

By this point in the project, I was beginning to see a drop off in engagement and students still expressed a dislike of eBooks. I decided that a radical change in direction was needed.

It was at the BETT conference that I came across a potential solution in the form of Renaissance Learning's Star™ reading Assessment and Accelerated™ Reader programmes. Used in conjunction, Star Assessment and Accelerated Reader provide a complete reading 'solution'. Star Assessment is a computer-based adaptive reading test, which provides detailed data on the student's reading zone of proximal development (ZPD)¹ i.e. the material that the learner is capable of easily reading and the material which they could read with a teacher's help and encouragement. Accelerated Reader can then be used by students and teachers to find suitable books (using AR Bookfinder) and to measure a student's progress towards reading goals through the student's completion of computerised book quizzes.

Crucially, for my students, the Accelerated Reader programme, allowed them to read printed, contemporary novels, which were of an appropriate level but not obviously graded. The quizzes would allow me to test another factor that my learners had identified as motivational: seeing an improvement in reading level.

¹ The zone of proximal development (ZPD) has been defined as: 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky, 1978: 86).



Although a number of independent studies, including one carried out by the National Literacy Trust in 2013 found that students using Accelerated Reader enjoyed reading more than those who didn't, I'm yet to find out whether this is the case with my particular group of students.

Early indications were promising – when I gave them their books, there was far more widespread enthusiasm than there had been when eBooks were allocated. Students also read silently for two ten-minute blocks and seemed completely absorbed (see above image).

The next phase of my research aims to establish whether:

- my learners' reading level will improve using Accelerated Reader
- and whether this, in turn, will result in motivation levels increasing.

References

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