

GOOD READERS NEED LOVE TOO!*

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ABSTRACT

The Class Reader Programme moves into its fifth year in 1995. The programme, the aims of which are to increase the reading load of students and introduce literature in the ESL classroom, has been praised for its awareness of the needs of weaker readers. All the readers are well supported with teaching files which have been designed to provide meaningful activities, which gradually build the confidence of the weak reader.

But how about the good or advanced reader? This research has its focus on the advanced reader. Surveys and Classroom Observations were carried out in 5 urban schools to determine the extent of attention given to good or advanced readers in the Class Reader Programme. It was found that 2 factors have had considerable effect on the attitude and performance of advanced readers in class. They are:

- i. (i) the selection of the books, and
- ii. (ii) teacher attitude

Ideas are provided as to how good or advanced readers can be motivated through tasks which are more challenging and which would exploit their potential to participate to the fullest.

Introduction

This present study, unlike previous studies on the Class Reader Programme, involves only good or advanced readers. The reason for the focus on advanced readers is simple: a random survey by teacher trainees during teaching practice have shown that in mixed ability classrooms the complaints were mainly from the advanced readers.

The aims of this study are to:

- i. determine if advanced readers react positively or negatively towards the Class Reader Programme;
- ii. determine teacher attitudes towards advanced readers through questionnaires and classroom observations; and
- iii. identify activities that promote involvement of advanced readers.

Methodology

This study was carried out in five schools, 3 in Petaling Jaya and 2 in Kuala Lumpur. Out of the five schools, three were co-educational schools. Of the remaining two, one was an all-boys school and the other, an all-girls school. The students were divided into sets. In each school there was a top class for advanced readers. Students in the top class scored 90% and above in the Class Reader Programme placement tests which was cloze in nature.

The subjects of this study were:

- i. 50 Form 3 students, 10 from each of the 5 urban schools in the Kuala Lumpur/Petaling Jaya area; and
- ii. 25 teachers; 5 from each of the 5 schools in this study.

Results and Discussion

Data from Questionnaires

(I) Student Questionnaire Surveys (Advanced Students)

	Strongly Disagree/No	Disagree	Un-decided	Agree	Strongly Agree/Yes
Positive reaction to books	20	10	2	7	11
Books read in one sitting	-	10	-	35	5
Books are too easy	-	-	-	7	43
Worksheets challenging	48	2	-	-	-
Teacher attention - positive	41	8	1	-	-
Extension work (journal, etc) done	49	1	-	-	-
Motivated to read further	28	7	3	2	-

(II) Student Questionnaire Surveys (Average Students)

	Strongly Disagree/No	Disagree	Un-decided	Agree	Strongly Agree/Yes
Positive reaction to books	-	-	-	39	11
Books read in one sitting	50	-	-	-	-
Books are too easy	48	2	-	-	-
Worksheets challenging	1	1	5	34	9
Teacher attention - positive	-	-	-	7	43

Extension work (journal, etc) done	50	-	-	-	-
Motivated to read further	-	10	2	8	30

Data from the questionnaire survey administered to 50 advanced readers and 50 average readers showed that there were marked differences in student attitude towards the Class Reader Programme (CRP). It is quite clear from the survey that average readers were happier with the books than their advanced counterparts. 60% of the advanced readers disapproved of the selection of books whereas 100% of the average readers approved of the selection of readers. Most of the advanced readers (80%) finished reading their books in a single sitting while none of the average students managed this. When asked to comment on the worksheets from the Teaching Files, 100% of the advanced readers thought that the worksheets were not challenging. On the other hand, the majority of the average readers, 86%, thought they were challenging. Teacher attention was reported by 100% of the average students to be positive. 98% of the advanced students however complained of the lack of attention from teachers. Both groups (advanced and average) claimed that extension work (journals, etc.) was not done. When asked if they were motivated to read further after reading their class readers, the majority of the advanced readers (70%) responded negatively. The average readers were more positive. 76% thought they were motivated to do further reading.

All 25 teachers (5 from each school) administered the pre-session diagnostic test. Consequently the classes were "set" according to test achievement. However all of the teachers disagreed that the books specified by the Schools Division met the needs of the advanced group. 46% of the teachers said the reading was done in "chunks" in class as specified in the teaching files. 40% mentioned that they produced no additional teaching material. Almost all (23 teachers out of 25) agreed that they paid minimal attention to advanced readers as compared to their average counterparts. 48% felt that advanced readers were not motivated to read. None of the teachers provided additional readings to advanced classes.

(III) Teacher * Questionnaires

	Strongly Disagree/No	Disagree	Un-decided	Agree	Strongly Agree/Yes
Administered pre-session diagnostic	-	-	-	-	25
Classes set	-	-	-	-	25
Selected books correspond to level (advanced group)	2	23	-	-	-
Approved of suitability to advanced group	13	12	-	-	-
Limited reading (done in chunks)	1	1	-	4	19
Produce other teaching material	5	15	-	3	2
Minimal attention to advance readers as compared to average readers	-	2	-	3	20
Advanced readers motivated to read	21	3	1	-	-
Provided additional reading	25	-	-	-	-

* teachers teaching advanced classes

Data from Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted in all five schools. Four observations were made in Form 3 classes in each school (2 in advanced classes and 2 in average classes). The following points were noted:

- i. Teachers in both the advanced and average classes relied very much on the activities in the teaching files. The suggested schemes were followed. The emphasis was very much on worksheet activities which focused on the consolidation of the 4 language skills and grammar;
- ii. Group work was almost non-existent. Only when there was role-play was there group work. Group work was more common in advanced classes than in average classes. However administration of group work also did not adhere to the principles of cooperative learning;
- iii. Reflective journals were not kept by students; and
- iv. Teachers did not pay individual attention to students. Conferencing was non-existent.

Discussion

It is clear from the data from the questionnaires that the books for average students (in the middle "sets") were well-received. However there were complaints from teachers as well as students on the selection of books for the advanced classes. In two of the schools, respondents even made additional comments on the book *The Secret Garden* (simplified and abridged version).

One student, when asked to make additional comments, pointed out some important points which administrators and teachers have to take note of:

"First of all, I think that it is good that we are streamed for the CRP, but the problem is that we do not get books for our standards, instead we get books which are abridged, with the English so low, therefore the books are not a pleasure to read at all. This year we got "The Secret Garden" which was so abridged and "childish looking" so to say. The activities we do regarding the books are sometimes interesting, but let's face it, the books are dull."

It is evident from student responses that there is probably a need to create a new level. At the moment there are 3 levels for which books are selected - elementary/intermediate/advanced. The advanced readers selected by the Schools Division seem to cater more for High Intermediate, which is realistically the best bunch of readers in most schools nationwide. The rare breed of advanced readers exist in fully residential schools and in urban schools like the five which were selected for this study. An important characteristic which differentiates this rare but significant breed from the high intermediate is that these advanced readers are students who have read on their own. In the survey at least 96% stated that they had read at least 15 story books a year! Taking this into consideration, one should think about whether the idea of introducing simplified and abridged versions is logical.

Group work was almost non-existent when advanced classes were observed. On the few occasions where there was group work, the principles of co-operative learning were not adhered to. In a typical

group work situation in an advanced ESL classroom, the teacher sat at the desk while students worked on role play/dramatization. This type of activity almost always was at the tail-end of the lesson. Time being limited, students rushed through their work and in role-play situations there was a tendency for players to read from scripts rather than act. In some cases, there was not even time for role-play groups to perform.

It is important that the role of the teacher as facilitator in group work or co-operative learning be reviewed. A teacher who does not facilitate effectively reduces group work to a routine which merely wastes precious time. In advanced classes, it is important that groups are optimal in size. Groups that are too large, with more than five, invite the free-rider effect (Slavin, 1988) where some members do all the work while others get a free ride. Diffusion of responsibility (Slavin, 1988) where the more dominating individuals decide that it is a waste of time interacting with introvert group members can also exist.

One way to make group work more productive in advanced classes would be to make it more organized and wholesome. In one particular instance where group work succeeded, the students were asked, at the post reading stage, to dramatize significant scenes in the book. The class was divided into three groups and preparation was done before class time. (They were given a week to prepare). To make it even more interesting, the teacher made it possible for students to act as peer evaluators. As one group performed, members of other groups watched and filled in evaluation forms.

Projects which instilled in advanced readers the need for co-operation in group work should be introduced. A good way to get students involved thoroughly and creatively would be to get them to produce videos on the stories they have read. However, in order to get them started, the teacher/facilitator has to provide necessary input. The Heinemann Project (1989) provides good worksheets for video production.

The problem with worksheets is that too much of them inhibits the on-going development of the advanced reader. Most worksheets promote activities which are spontaneous, nonreflective activities which reward the impulsive, guessing student and penalize the "reflective" student who tends to weigh all the considerations in solving a problem, without all the loopholes, and then, after extensive reflection, carefully ventures a solution (Brown, 1980:93-94).

Ali Yahya (1994) explains that, in ESL classrooms, sensation and intuition far outdo reflection. Sensation, for instance, he says, is present in the integrated activities classroom through highly comprehensible input, physical involvement and the sensual quality of the words and action. Intuition, says Ali Yahya, is also another phenomenon of the ESL classroom. Language classrooms in Malaysia show an over-riding concern for promoting language activities which focus on brainstorming, fast-writing and "talking-off-the-top-of- your-head" activities. There is an extreme concern for spontaneous intuitive use of the target language.

Both sensation and intuition are great contributors to language acquisition. This no one can deny. However, would there be an over-sell in the advanced reading class if these two elements were over-stressed? Ellis (1990:118) states that when sensation and intuition have over-bearing importance in the ESL classroom, it results in "interaction for interaction's sake". Students go through the entire episode or classroom participation, thereby ignoring the important needs of advanced students to abstract, generalize and synthesize intrapersonally before responding interpersonally in group work.

The CRP has been formulated to increase the reading load of ESL students. The programme aims to consolidate all the other skills - listening, speaking, writing and even grammar through the extra load

of reading. As such the teaching files are loaded with worksheets which focus on the consolidation of the skills mentioned. Although this is appropriate for average and weak students, it may not be so for the advanced group. What advanced readers need are worksheets and tasks which focus on the development of "reflection", hence the need for students to work intrapersonally before getting on to work interpersonally.

Ali Yahya (1994) suggests that brainstorming activities have to be complemented with "brain-besieging" activities. He elaborates that when discussing "friendship" as a theme in a story, teachers should not get students to talk spontaneously about the qualities of a friend but rather put forth a question for which the teacher himself is the seeker of answers. Hence Ali Yahya suggests that the question should be framed thus: "What does a person find in a friend that he or she doesn't find in an acquaintance?"

Advanced or good readers need as much attention as average or weak readers. In classroom observations it was noticed that average readers received a lot of attention from teachers, especially when they worked individually. Most of this attention was in the form of support and guidance. Students normally consulted teachers when they had problems working on tasks in worksheets. Although this kind of teacher attention is probably not necessary for advanced readers, it is wrong to conclude that there is no need for student-teacher conferences at all. After all there are avenues like reader journals where there is a need for interaction. In journals, readers are constantly involved in reading and responding. Reading at advanced levels should be "conceived of as a process of making and sharing meanings, as ways of exploring and understanding what it means to live, as well as ways of understanding one's own and the author's meaning making processes (Thomson, 1987:13). Thomson suggested "jotting of immediate responses to completed texts as well as responses to texts during the process of reading them". In Thomson's research, data revealed that readers learnt to inspect and discover their own thinking, reading processes and problems. Teachers were also able to do diagnostic analyses of students' reading/thinking/writing abilities.

There are several well defined ways in which teachers in advanced classes can direct journal writers. Hancock (1992), who studied the literature response journals, found that the responses can be categorized into five domains - character interaction, character empathy, prediction and validation, personal experiences and philosophical reflections. In order to encourage students to write journals which include all these five domains of responses, some guidelines given by Soraya Ali (1991), who wrote her Ph.D on Methodology of Teaching Literature, are:

...thoughts of whether the story reminds you of any other stories or novels that you have read;

...predictions or guesses about the ending of the story;

...similarities of some of the events in the story to your own life;

...identification with one of the characters in the story;

...description of how you picture some of the characters or scenes in the story in your own mind;

...thoughts about how certain characters in the story remind you of someone you know

...feelings towards what you think the writer is trying to convey in the story

...suitability of you as a reader of that story or whether you think the story is written for a different type of reader

...problems or questions you have about certain characters or events in the story

...thoughts about how the story relates to life in general

(in Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Zalina Mohd Lazim,
1993:143-154)

Conclusion

If we acknowledge the existence of a group of readers whose level is above that of the present advanced level that is specified by the Schools Division, Ministry of Education, then there must definitely be a need to review the selection of books to take into consideration this new 4th level. It would be interesting to note here again that, when students were asked to suggest what type of books they preferred to read, both boys and girls listed adventure, mystery and romance. Almost 70% (boys and girls) suggested Roald Dahl as the writer they most wanted to be associated with. Although most teachers might assume that Shakespeare would be a definite no-no, it was revealed in student responses that they (advanced readers) preferred to read Shakespeare as they liked the idea that it could be staged. This is a very interesting point indeed.

The Language Model (Carter and Long, 1991), as manifested in the CRP, uses literature to consolidate language skills taught in the ESL classroom. There is too much emphasis on consolidation of language skills which the advanced reader might not have much need. This would mean that aspects of the Cultural Model (Carter and Long, 1991), which has been looked at as something only for pure literature students, would, after all, have a place in the Reader Classroom. All the students in the advanced classes in this study were science stream students. Exposing them to a class reader curriculum based on the Cultural Model would not only give them the appropriate challenge that they need, but also transport them into the realm of another culture, and this would eventually provide them with the motivation to indulge in the study of humanities; something which every Malaysian science stream student more of in life!

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