

BECOMING AN EFFICIENT READER: A PROPOSAL FOR A SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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R *eading should be the cornerstone of a school's curriculum in order to build up the other skills. Despite the fact that reading tends to be an obligation and a hard task, it should be seen as a fun activity which will extend the student's knowledge of the world. Reading efficiently involves not only understanding, speed and fluency, but also the application of the student's knowledge, thus promoting critical thinking. That is to say, the "ability to reach sound conclusions based on observation and information". Due to the importance of acquiring reading skills in a foreign language, we see the necessity to stimulate students toward becoming efficient readers. That means avoiding word by word reading (Williams: 1984), and developing students' abilities to understand and comprehend a text and to read fluently.*

Introduction

This project was conducted at Fundación Gimnasio Los Portales, a middle-high class female institution that promotes English as a second language in a bilingual environment, taking into account three levels : beginners (pre-school), intermediate (primary) and advanced (high school).

We noticed that beginners present various and serious difficulties not only recognizing sounds but also matching them with alphabetical characters; as a consequence, they can not read fluently nor understand what they

read. They use their native language phonetics to read; therefore, they have reading comprehension problems (Dunn: 1984).

Intermediate students have problems understanding a text because of lack of background and interest in the reading. They can not use their dictionary even though it is handy for they don't know how it works. In addition, they reject the idea of searching and looking for information by themselves. They are very dependable on the teacher's presence and prodding. Besides, they present troubles in reading comprehension and analyzing from context, associating, contrasting, comparing and relating different issues.

Advanced students consider reading more as a fun activity than an obligatory one. On the other hand, they experience problems understanding what they read when they are not able to figure out the context or when they are mistaken in pronunciation. Therefore, the meaning is misunderstood. One of the most common obstacles reading is radio-T.V communication because students would rather watch T.V. than read a book. They are in favor of short easy-to-understand texts.

In accordance with this, we placed special emphasis on how we could help students become efficient readers. For the purpose of this project, reading well and effectively is the activity of understanding written words, where everyone has the possibility of giving opinions

as to what a particular statement or situation means. The efficacy of this task is based on standards or levels that should be considered appropriate in the school's curriculum in terms of reading proficiency and, consequently, upon implementation, action and changes utterly considered in the pedagogical process.

Procedure

We worked on action research because it "pays attention to the way learners handle tasks and activities and how they try to solve their classroom problems" (Gómez et al: 1993). It gave us the opportunity to detect students' interests and difficulties, to follow up the implementation of the reading process, to assess students' development and to analyze the effectiveness of the process.

To detect the students' interest and difficulties we applied a questionnaire for each level. We found that the majority of the students enjoy reading when it is not an obligation. However, they have serious problems in understanding due to the lack of previous knowledge, whether in phonics, vocabulary or practices in interpretation.

Students must be aware of the importance of reading not only as a means of getting information, but also as a skill to develop critical thinking. To enhance the girls' understanding requires training, inferring by context and word formation as well as looking up meanings in the dictionary.

We followed up the implementation of the reading process through classroom observation and identified the standards and skills to be considered in the school's curriculum in terms of reading proficiency.

Through classroom observation we assessed the students' development and analyzed the effectiveness of the process. To come up with results, we applied different reading activities according to the standards established beforehand, and instated reading strategies (Williams: 1984) such as: pre-reading (in order to predict and improve vocabulary); while reading (where there is analysis and understanding); and, last, post-reading as a way of building up critical thinking.

Regarding the standards we have chosen for the beginners, intermediates and advanced, it is necessary to match the abilities to work on with these groups, whose characteristics are quite different. The development of the skills (abilities) depends on features such as age, sex, personality, qualifications, social status, etc.

Beginners, whose ages are between 4 and 8 years old and are up to now creating symbolization, are able to identify, discriminate and relate sounds and letters, reading whole words. When the student is sure of her ability, the motivation to read brings her interest to identify new words and look them up in a dictionary. Furthermore, reading comprehension provides the best means to analyze through creativity and innovation, where the students display their imagination by making predictions or changing the end of a story.

Intermediate and advanced students, whose ages are between 8 and 18 years old, are living and reaching stages which imply analysis, abstraction, comprehension and cognitive ability reflected in long term memory. Thus, students are able to understand explicitly and non-explicitly stated information given according to their level and, simultaneously, widen their vocabulary by inferring meanings

and familiarizing themselves with special lexical items (Grellet: 1996).

The process of reading supposes an ongoing task so the opportunity of distinguishing and discussing ideas is given to help or ensure students improve not only their reading speed, but their immediate understanding, and, at the same time, enable them to arrive at the last stages of reading such as scanning and skimming through a text in order to take their own notes.

Results

In order to help students develop reading skills, we applied activities consistent with the students' interests in terms of themes, length and the reading target.

Beginners practiced the alphabet phonemes (Ackland: 1996) and tried to use them to decode new vocabulary to understand the stories; as a consequence, they have improved their fluency and understanding of what they read. Some of them have to practice the phonemes more. They don't understand when they read because they do not distinguish all the phonemes correctly and, therefore, struggle with the reading as they make strong efforts to decode and decipher.

Girls got the gist and identified the characters. They also worked out the meaning of some words by context. Reading has turned out to be very challenging and exciting. Now the girls are busily engaged with the activities and have improved their reading skills.

Intermediate students are making progress in respect to reading and reading comprehension. Even though the process is tough, they are working step-by-step, improving their ability to

analyze, not only by inferring meanings, but also by detailing the text and carrying out the sequence of events (Vince: 2001).

In addition, it is important to continue working on helping the students master critical thinking by solving problems, comparing and selecting what is meaningful.

Advanced students were really involved in the activities as they were able to read between the lines (Acevedo and Gower: 1998). On the other hand, they read for complete, detail comprehension, reaching out to encompass the writer's purpose and style. That means achieving linguistic and pragmatic competence. We looked into the students' eagerness to read aloud, to share and add new words and structures to express themselves freely and fluently. Most of them showed a high level of comprehension answering, analyzing and discussing properly and accurately. They have a few weaknesses, though, such as problems with summarizing and with reading speed.

We can say that the effectiveness of the process is evident, since we noticed the students' willingness to develop reading as part of their learning process and to improve their reading skill. Our jumping-off point is, "The more you read, the more you learn".

Los Portales School's curriculum is going to be based on reading as an outstanding skill, encompassing specific abilities like inferring, associating, comparing and contrasting, and also on activities such as role play, discussions, debates, reading of pictures and, finally, solving problems, drawing conclusions and identifying the writers' purposes and styles. Following these abilities, almost all of our students should become efficient readers.

Conclusions

As a conclusion we can say that the standards that should be considered in the school's curriculum in terms of reading proficiency should foment development of specific abilities such as pronunciation, fluency, inferring, associating, comparing, contrasting, solving problems, drawing conclusions and identifying the writers' purposes and styles. These abilities contribute to the learning process where reading will be the starting point to enhance linguistic and pragmatic competence. For the Portales school, pronunciation is a vital issue of understanding in the reading process in the early stages, therefore students will be able to figure out the meaning by context and word formation and to match what they read with what they listen to, recognizing the relations among sounds/ letters/ words/ pronunciation.

Via this project we can conclude that the pedagogical process implemented in the school starts by sensitizing the students to recognize and identify the phonemes, to improve their reading ability and understanding. Later on students will read fluently and at normal speed, using punctuation properly and running into analyzing and comprehension. The last step is based on reading with a questioning attitude where students learn how to engage and interact with a text.

In order to help students become efficient readers, teachers should make reading a stimulating activity, where students understand by analyzing, inferring, comparing and selecting what is meaningful, avoiding reading word by word. "Efficient learners don't read word by word. They move their eyes along the lines of a text, taking in meaningful groups of about three to six words at a time" (Acevedo and Gower: 1998, 34).

Pedagogical Implications

Through reading we can reach linguistic and pragmatic competence, increase students' background, acquire new vocabulary, infer by context and word formation, understand relations within the sentence, link sentences and ideas, skim and scan.

Comprehension plays an important role in the reading process as it is a prerequisite to working on a text in depth. It means analyzing, comparing and drawing conclusions as being the basic abilities to engage students in the reading process.

Reading efficiently encourages students' participation and promotes high self-esteem and self-confidence which is why teachers need to change their minds and methods when leading the reading task by making up new strategies and activities to stimulate the accurate process of learning.

Further research

The purpose of this investigation is to leave a path for those who really have an interest in education vis-a-vis looking for more data based on classroom research which will improve and renew methods for our students.

As a further consideration in this project, we'd like to do research as to when the reading process in English should start without interfering with the Spanish reading process; how the mass media really contribute to improving students' reading skills, and how to make the dictionary a useful tool in the reading process.

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