Collaborative and Communicative Reading

Greg Goodmacher and Asako Kajiura

Abstract:

This article examines some of the reasons why reading classes are not fulfilling their potential to motivate students and to increase the acquisition of a second language. Negative aspects of some typical reading classes and the positive aspects of some ratherunorthodox reading methodologies are examined. The social aspect of reading in the "real world" is considered. Unfortunately, many reading teachers do not take into account the social nature of students and the human desire for interaction. Arguments in favor of turning reading into a collaborative activity rather than a solo activity are put forth. Furthermore, this article provides specific examples and advice to reading teachers and writers of teaching materials regarding how to facilitate collaborative and communicative reading lessons.

Key terms: collaborative learning, reading comprehension, materials development, learner styles, motivation

Introduction

There are many innovative reading teachers who are trying to create reading classes that take into account the whole person. Unfortunately, the typical reading classroom does not lead to meaningful exchanges of information. For students in such classes reading is a solo activity. The only communication that occurs is that of teachers giving instructions and then imparting the correct answers to the students who scribble an x across a wrong answer and circle the correct answers. In many cases, the students do not know why an answer was incorrect. Reading becomes a chore that involves bending one's head to the page and inputting unknown words into an electronic dictionary.

This need not be the case. Many of the aforementioned innovative reading teachers are using collaborative reading techniques that motivate students. Students can actually read and complete reading assignments in pairs and small groups. While doing so, they are teaching and learning from each other. This process is empowering, stimulating, and educational.

Weaknesses of the Typical Reading Class

There are numerous activities that can take place in EFL reading classes. However, two pedagogically inefficient routines for teaching reading to students are commonly used in Japan. One starts with teachers assigning students to read a text and then waiting for students to finish reading it. There is no communication between students. Sometimes, students, again individually, answer a few pre-reading questions or do another short activity which helps students activate a reading schema (Matsuhara, 2003). In many textbooks, a reading text is almost always followed by a series of questions described as "comprehension questions" even though those questions tend to be more tests of memory than of actual textual comprehension. At the end, the teacher

usually informs the students of the correct answers to the comprehension questions. Students circle their correct answers and write an x next to their incorrect answers, usually without understanding why the answers are incorrect.

Reading teachers inspired by the grammar translation approach to language learning work in universities throughout Japan. For these teachers, common activities are assigning students to take turns translating paragraphs or sentences while the other students silently read along. The teacher critiques the translation while students listen and scribble notes. Many reading teachers repeat the above procedures or slight variations of those methods for the duration of each school semester.

One more problem for reading students is that in many Japanese universities, reading is considered to be a separate skill and teachers are not encouraged to integrate reading with other skills. Additionally, reading is sometimes taught only as preparation for examinations. For instance, teachers at one Japanese university were recently told that they must teach reading as preparation for the TOEIC test. Reading for any other purpose was not allowed. Teachers at that college reported that students were not motivated by the long forced exposure to reading for test purposes.

The fact that many classes in Japanese colleges and high schools are too large for a teacher to personally assist all of the students who are having different problems related to reading is a justification for introducing collaborative reading activities. A thoughtful teacher may lecture to give tips to the class about reading issues that the teacher perceives as being common, but it is most likely that the teacher can neither discover nor attend to all of the reading problems. Poor readers or readers who are not at the same level of their classmates may experience frustration as a result of scoring badly on comprehension questions. Often, they do not learn why their choices were wrong. This is a de-motivating situation. The most dedicated teacher will not have enough time to teach each comprehension question and answer to each student. If a teacher tried to do this, the reading class would become a lecture class about reading. However, if we implement collaborative reading activities, ones in which students teach each other, we can make the reading class a more effective learning environment.

The Social Nature of Reading and Collaborative Reading Activities
For students, who are not intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 1991) to read English, the above processes are probably not very stimulating. Important and meaningful aspects of the reading experience that often take place when reading in one's native language are missing. What is conspicuously absent is a communicative reason for reading. The essential experience of asking questions or sharing our feelings and ideas regarding the texts that we read is missing. This gap can be filled when teachers introduce reading activities that are based on theories of collaborative learning. Collaborative reading activities can motivate students and lead to deeper thinking. As Gokhale (1995) explains, "The active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases interest among the participants but also promotes critical thinking."

In contrast with reading in one's native language, most of the reading that takes place in the typical reading class in Japan is a solitary activity that rarely involves communication or making any significant decisions of a personal nature. The only social interaction that usually takes place is that of a teacher asking students to announce which of the items in the multiple choice comprehension questions they think are correct. This

information exchange is personally meaningless. A reading class that involves collaboration centered on the content of reading texts will be a class that will succeed more in arousing students' interest in reading than the typical asocial reading class.

Of course, in the world outside the classroom, reading is often a solitary pursuit. People who read in their first language do read books for relaxation before sleeping and read newspapers on trains while surrounded by strangers with whom they do not communicate. On the other hand, and this is of extreme importance in regard to motivation, a large percentage of reading is also part of affirming relationships, making important decisions with other people, and learning collaboratively. Would these readers enjoy their solitary readings of novels, short stories, and newspapers, etc. as much if they had to respond to the texts by answering multiple-choice and true or false questions? Probably not, but many of them would enjoy discussing ideas and expressing their feelings about the reading material, as is done with much of the reading that takes place outside of the reading class.

A significant percentage of the reading that is done outside of classrooms involves much more social interaction than the one-way communication of an author encoding messages in a text and a reader interpreting that message. For instance, when family members read separate sections of a newspaper, they sometimes interrupt each other to share news that surprises them, that upsets them, pleases them, or that will interest the others. Writers of articles for journals such as this one, read other articles, read studies, read charts, etc. with the intention of using the digested reading to create and share new insights with others.

Probably, a majority of one's reading in the "real world" leads to exchanges of information or actions of personal significance, such as buying one type of car versus another after reading automobile evaluations, choosing to buy locally-grown produce after reading about health risks, or something as simple as choosing to see one movie instead of another one after reading a movie review.

Pair Reading Activities

Support for pair reading activities comes from a variety of approaches to teaching and theories of language acquisition. Theories of learning styles inform us that students learn in different ways and that teachers should use a variety of teaching methods so as to best stimulate each and every student. A traditional reading classroom which focuses on having students individually analyze the grammatical structure of sentences will "favor analytic learners who like to focus their conscious attention on discrete learning points" (Tomlinson et al, 2001, p. 83) but may not benefit other students. Gokhale (1995) reminds us that "according to Vygotsky, students are capable of performing at higher intellectual levels when asked to work in collaborative systems than when asked to work individually."

Pair work exercises that involve students reading a text and discussing the text or sharing information with other students will provide students with comprehensible input of both spoken and written language. Various pair and group work based on readings also provide students with chances to focus on form. Another benefit of these exercises is that the communication is often personally meaningful, especially when they are expressing their interpretations of texts and relating the text content to their own experiences. A result of allowing students to discuss their feelings and lives in relation to the text will lead to gains in motivation.

Busy teachers do not always have to create new teaching materials in order to facilitate pair and small group work for reading practice. However, taking a new approach to many of the traditional reading textbook activities will lead to a more communicative reading class without teachers having to reinvent the wheel. This approach involves reordering (Islam & Mares, 2003) and devising pair work activities from exercises which students usually do individually. Skimming and scanning pre-reading exercises can be turned into pair or small group activities. Turning them into contests can stimulate competitive groups of students. One way to do this is to arrange students into small groups, which must scan a text for selected information, and one student must present the teacher with the information that is written on one piece of paper. Other students tell the writer what to write and also check the findings of their partners.

Students who share and discuss their answers to comprehension questions will gain confidence and insight into the reading process. The procedure is really quite simple. Students are put into pairs or small groups. They must be taught how to ask useful questions for enquiring about the answers to the reading problems, for example, "What is your answer to number one?" or "Where in the text did you find that information?" Within a typical classroom, there are students who like to help others, students who are reluctant to ask questions to the teacher in front of the entire class, and students who need someone to give them personal attention. All of these students benefit from such a collaborative approach to solving traditional reading text problems.

Another rather unorthodox teaching method that leads to greater student social involvement in the classroom and deeper concentration on the reading material is that of turning pairs of students into designers of reading texts. Teachers assign students to choose a reading text from a newspaper article or the Internet, etc., write a certain number of vocabulary development exercises, create their own pre- and post-reading discussion activities, and design other language exercises based on the text. Teachers must provide clear instructions. Therefore, it is appropriate for teachers to show examples of various exercises that are common with reading texts. Because students are creating their own exercises that other students will use, they feel a certain responsibility and motivation that does not exist in a classroom where students are merely users of teaching materials instead of creators and teachers. The students will read more deeply and consider details in more depth. Teachers who assign students to create teaching materials report greater class involvement (Goodmacher, 2008).

READ2D, or read to discuss differences activities, are useful for motivating pairs to work together and improve their reading skills and critical thinking and social skills. For READ2D, two students are each given a text. Each text has differences of lexical items: transitional adverbs, nouns, or numbers, etc. The focus of the lesson determines the differences. In the first part of this exercise, students may not look at their partner's text. Student A reads the text aloud to B. At the same time, student B silently reads his or her nearly identical text. When student B notices that A has read information that is different from that on B's text, B says, "Stop please," and informs A of the different information. Both students write the different information above the sentence on each paper. Students continue this process, taking turns after each paragraph, until they have finished the text.

In the second part of READ2D, the two students put their papers together and discuss which information is correct and circle their choices. In this part, they are discussing what they believe is correct, based on their prior knowledge of the content, grammatical structures within the text, rhetorical structure of the text, and

general comprehension. When there is a disagreement, the students must explain their choices. With READ2D activities, reading changes from a passive experience to a very interactive process. As Day and Park (2005) explain, "It is critical that teachers help their students create meaning." Finally, in the third part of this activity, students are provided with a third text that has the correct information. Students skim the third text to learn if their guesses were correct or not. This activity works in general reading classes and in content-based classes as well.

Example of READ2D

Directions for a READ2D Activity: Sit next to your partner. Partner A slowly read the first paragraph aloud. Partner B read silently and listen. When the information is different, B must say "Stop" and tell A about the different information. Both students write the different information on their papers and continue. Partner B read the next paragraph aloud.

Partner A's First Paragraph:

The Olympic Games were started by the Greeks more than 3,500 years ago when Greece was an important world power. In those days, women were not allowed to watch or to compete in the Olympics. Men competed without wearing clothes. Some of the early Olympic Games included running, skiing, and boxing. The Olympic Games stopped when Greece lost its great power.

Partner B's First Paragraph:

The Olympic Games were started by the Greeks less than 3,500 years ago when Greece was an unimportant world power. In those days, women were not allowed to listen or to compete in the Olympics. Men competed without wearing tennis shoes. Some of the early Olympic Games included running, wrestling, and boxing. The Olympic Games stopped when Greece lost its great language.

Conclusion

Much of reading in the "real world" leads towards some sort of interaction between people. Unfortunately, many reading teachers do not take into account the social nature of students and the human desire for interaction. Instead, students are often assigned to read texts and individually do activities that may be de-motivating. Furthermore, typical reading exercises tend to be of limited use in assisting students to understand why they made mistakes. Collaborative reading techniques motivate students, help students to understand their mistakes, allow students to teach and learn from each other, and help develop critical thinking. Reading classes should allow for open-ended exercises that involve oral and written communication. Teachers should study and use a variety of activities in reading classes, especially those involving pair work, and creators of teaching materials need to write reading textbooks with collaborative learning in mind.

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