

Using School Content Based Texts to Increase Secondary School Pupils' Motivation to Read and Develop their Reading Skill: The Case of Second Secondary Year Pupils in Algeria

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is twofold: to investigate Algerian secondary school pupils' interests and preferences for the selection of reading materials and to examine the possibility of taking pupils' existing knowledge acquired in other school subjects into consideration for the selection of reading materials to develop their reading skill and learn E.F.L through content. This may bring an answer to the lack of interest pupils seem to show when presented to the English texts contained in their English textbooks and will perhaps contribute to the design of an E.F.L reading program for secondary school pupils. This program could take into consideration pupils' interests and background knowledge for the selection of reading materials to the English reading classroom. This may develop pupils' reading skill and reading to learn strategies, which they will need after leaving school.

Keywords: reading skill, reading comprehension, background knowledge, text selection.

1. Introduction

The reading skill has an important place in the teaching of E.F.L in Algeria, because the main objective of the English subject in the secondary school, is to enable learners to use English as a tool or as a means to acquire extra information about their field of their study and later to explore by themselves documents related to their jobs.

Yet it seems that this objective has not been reached because even after years of English study, many university students and specialists are unable to read English easily; the vocabulary and syntaxes of news magazines and scientific documents are quite beyond their reach. This may be caused by many factors but if we look into the pupils' English textbooks, we may be able to realize that one of the sources of the problem is the reading materials which do not seem to attract the pupils to read and do not motivate them to do the suggested reading activities to develop their reading skill. The topics of these texts which are principally determined by the syllabus to display language forms to be acquired do not seem to interest our young readers. This frustrating situation has led to the following questions:

- 1- What topics would interest pupils to read in the Algerian secondary school English Classroom?
- 2- Can pupil's background knowledge acquired in other school subjects be considered for the selection of reading materials to facilitate their reading comprehension and develop their reading skill?
- 3- What type of reading tasks might be set to motivate learners to read and use strategies for more comprehension and learning content and language from these reading materials?

These questions are set to conduct an action research based on the hypotheses that:

- 1- Secondary school pupils would be more interested to read texts representative of those selected for real world, personal and study reading
- 2- They would be more motivated to read materials presenting new information on topics related to subjects they are studying in school
- 3- They would be more motivated to do reading tasks that reflect the process of personal and study reading.

2. Methodology

The methodology chosen is in the form of action research because it is believed that this methodology as its name suggests has the dual aims of action and research: action to bring about change in a teaching programme, and research

to increase understanding on the part of the researcher and the school community. This methodology has considerable advantages: it provides a mixture of responsiveness and rigour; so it meets both the action and research requirements.

The informants involved in this research are secondary school pupils who study English for Academic Purpose in the level of secondary school (2nd secondary year) in lycée El Haoues Sidi Bel Abbès, Algeria. They are young teenagers aged between 14 and 17 who come to the secondary school after having attended at least 200 hours of E.F.L teaching classes and they are expected to master the reading of simple passages and understand them through performing various activities.

To collect data two instruments were used: a questionnaire (see appendix 1) and two reading comprehension lessons (see appendix 2)

3. Defining Reading

The term reading is used in different ways: it includes decoding, deciphering and identifying written words as it means pronouncing words as in reading aloud. These are very important aspects of reading because if we cannot recognize the words in print, we cannot begin to read, as it is also important to associate writing with the spoken words, but these concern only reading at an elementary stage, a stage which does not last very long. It also means extracting meaning a text, and interpreting messages given by a writer. This is the most purposeful and enjoyable kind of reading.

This kind of reading is like the process of communication, that is, a writer has a message in his mind, he wants to communicate it, instead of speaking it, he encodes it in a written form: it becomes a text. This text is accessible to the mind of another person who can read it. If the message is decoded, communication is achieved; so communication (effective reading) is achieved only if the writer and reader share the same code (language), certain assumptions, and the same knowledge about the world. Goodman, in Carrell (1988), sees reading within the broader context of communicative meaning seeking information processing:

Reading is a receptive language process. It is a psycholinguistic process, in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning, which the reader constructs. There is thus, an essential interaction between language and thought in reading. The writer encodes thought as language, and the reader decodes language to thought. (Goodman, in Carrell, 1988:12)

Reading then, far from being passive is an active skill, which requires from the reader to go through processes to get at the meaning, interpret and extract information.

3.1 The Bottom-up Model

It is a way of representing the process of reading which follows a "commonsense" description of the different stages a reader goes through:

- a) Eyes look
- b) Letters are identified and sounded out
- c) Words are recognized
- d) Words are allocated to grammatical class and sentence structure
- e) Sentences give meaning
- f) Meaning leads to thinking

So it goes from letters to sound, to words, to sentences and finally to meaning and thinking. Thus, the reader decodes language in a linear way to reach meaning at the end. This way of extracting meaning from the written representation of a language is useful at an early stage of reading before a reader reaches an accurate, rapid and automatic recognition of words.

3.2 The Top-Down Model

It is another model, which includes thinking and meaning at an early stage. This is illustrated below:

- a) Eyes look
- b) Thinking and predicting about meaning
- c) Sample sentences as a whole to check meaning
- d) To check further, look at words

e) If still uncertain, study letters

This processing is almost the reverse of the first model, and proceeds from prediction about meaning to attention to smaller units, and seems to prove what Eskey(1983) said: " *What the brain tells the eyes is much more important than what the eyes tell the brain.*"(Eskey, 1983:2)

This process of selecting information, predicting, interacting, sampling and confirming has led researchers to view reading as a psycholinguistic process, which involves the readers' sub-skills and socio-cultural knowledge. Anderson (1978) sees reading as a "concept-driven top-down process where the reader makes use of his knowledge to understand the content of a text; and Widdowson (1979) focuses on the reader's "active information processing". These theorists see the process turned around, so to speak. Readers, they say, bring all of their experiences and background knowledge to the reading task. They expect meaning from print and they coordinate various language cue systems (pragmatic, syntactic, semantic, and graphophonic) to get at that meaning. Kenneth Goodman's model (1994) of the reading process probably typifies this theoretical stance best for most professionals. He originally referred to his model as a psycholinguistic one to reflect its language-processing essence; he now terms it a 'Transactional Socio-Psycholinguistic Model of Reading,' capturing the recent theories of trans-action and the influence on language use of social settings and pragmatics: rules for language use that differ according to different social contexts. According to this model, readers begin the act of reading by recognizing what they are reading and sampling and selecting from the visual array (letters and words) based on their predictions of what they expect to find. These predictions result from informed inferences about the meaning as it is supported and conveyed by the syntax and the graph phonics (letter/sound units). As readers read in this fashion, they confirm or disconfirm their predictions by using their knowledge of the different language cue systems to detect when meaning breaks down. When a breakdown in meaning occurs, and is detected, readers go back and correct, again employing the different language cue systems, as they are appropriate. Goodman calls these actions by the reader 'cognitive strategies.'

3.3 *The Interactive Model*

This model proposed by Rumelhart (1977 and updated in 1984) accounts for both bottom-up and top-down processing of information. It is the first of a number of interaction models of reading, and incorporates the possibility of parallel processing, that is, the simultaneous processing of information from more than one source: these sources include information from the identification of a Reading, within this theory, is not linear but cyclical. Visual, perceptual, syntactic, and semantic cycles are constantly in play, each dependent on and enabling the others. In addition, reading, according to this theory, is goal oriented, with the goal being meaning. Using inference and prediction, the reader can continue to move toward meaning without completing the optical, perceptual, and syntactic cycles. Thus, as opposed to the theories described in the preceding section, comprehension is not dependent on linear, accurate, automatic decoding and letter-word recognition.

Later it has been developed by processing on a higher level, rather than on a lower level of processing visual information, and a schema (a unit of knowledge) is proposed to provide framework for interpreting the world which is, in reading, the world of the text. It is assumed that we can only interpret visual information and words by relating them to our prior knowledge and experience, which are packaged into schemata

3.4 *The Schema Theory*

The role of background knowledge in reading comprehension has been formalized as schema theory, which states that a text does not by itself carry meaning, but provides directions for readers to how they should construct meaning from their previously acquired knowledge. Comprehending a text becomes then the result of an interactive process between the reader's background knowledge and the text, as Nunan (1991) stated:

Knowledge we carry in our head is organized into interrelated patterns. These are constructed from our previous experience of the experiential world and guide us as we make predictions about what we might expect to experience in a given context. (Nunan, 1991:68)

According to schema theory, all knowledge (about all concepts) is contained in units or slots called schemata. They are abstract structures, which contain not only the knowledge itself but also how knowledge is to be used. These would help an individual to produce an anticipated meaning. Thus, comprehension of a material depends on an interaction between the structure and content of the material and the individual's background knowledge.

It is also useful to make a distinction between formal schemata (background knowledge of formal, rhetorical, organizational structures of different types of texts) and content schemata (background knowledge of the content area of a text, such as a text about pollution, cooking or sport). So schema theory gives a particular importance to the reader's schemata or prior knowledge in the process of interpreting new information, that is, if the schemata do not exist, they cannot be used, so comprehension cannot be constructed as Carrell (1988:81) said:

Readers attempt to provide schemata to make sense of texts, and they do so persistently. However, these efforts will fail if the reader cannot access the appropriate existing schemata, or if the reader does not possess the appropriate schemata necessary to understand a text. (Carrell 1988:81)

It is then unlikely, for example, for any reader to comprehend a highly technical or scientific text, if he has not acquired first the requisite background of scientific knowledge no matter how simplified is the text.

4. Data Analysis

In the beginning of the school year, a first questionnaire was submitted to the pupils to have a clear idea about their social and educational background, and the place of reading in their homes. Three months after a second questionnaire (see appendix 1) was submitted to the same pupils and aimed at obtaining information about their attitudes towards reading in general and reading English texts in particular.

Thirty-five copies of this questionnaire were completed and gathered for data analysis. The chosen treatment for calculating the data was the evaluation through percentage. The questionnaire insisted on three parts.

Part one intended to investigate pupils' reading habit in L₁, preferences and the purpose of their reading. I also wanted to know how frequently they read their schoolbooks to know if the reading habit has been inculcated through reading assignments in other school subjects. The aim of part two was to try to assess their attitudes toward English as a school subject, the English textbook and the English texts they have read so far. Part three, however, was designed to identify their preferences and to know their opinions on reading English texts related to lessons they have studied in other school subjects.

4.1 Results of the Questionnaire

4.1.1 Question one:

It seems, through the answers to this question that the reading habit is not well developed since only 28% often read and we cannot really take in account the answers of 22 pupils (62 %) who answered that they *sometimes* read because it is very difficult to assess accurately the frequency of the adverb *sometimes*.

4.1.2 Question two:

The aim of this question is twofold: it is to know about the reading materials pupils read and the frequency of their reading these materials. The results given in table 1 show the classification of the reading materials, which are often read: first newspapers (54%) second schoolbooks (40%), then magazines (23%) and finally books (11%). This proves to be true if we consider the classification in term of the less frequently read materials: books come at the first position with 24%, magazines 7%, schoolbooks 1% and finally newspapers 0%.

4.1.3 Question three:

The answers to this question show clearly that most of pupils (77%) prefer reading texts dealing with scientific topics and it seemed strange that at their age, only 15% prefer reading stories; this seems to be confirmed by their answers to question four.

4.1.4 Question four:

In fact, only 14% stated that they read for pleasures and the majority of them read for learning 60% and for information 22%.

4.1.5 Questions five and six:

Responses to these questions showed that pupils are not often given reading assignments as homework and English is ranked third after Arabic and French in the frequency of reading activities as homework. Responses to question six confirmed that the English textbook was the least used one at home. Pupils do not open their English textbook at home unless they have homework to do, for most of them 58% it is the Natural Sciences course book, which is the most, used, but what was not predictable was that the French textbook was ranked second before the Arabic and English textbook. This showed that the English textbook is not given great priority confirming why five students do not even have it and others quite often do not bring it with them in the classroom. It also showed that these pupils might have more information and knowledge in their biology subject than on any other one in the school curriculum.

4.1.6 Question seven:

A little bit more than half of the class (52%) seem to like the English subject although I must admit that I was expecting a larger number to have a positive attitude towards it according to my prior observation (they often report to find English lessons relaxing and not too much demanding). Yet, there are still 25% who find them not very interesting and 15% find them boring. Three pupils even responded that they hated English. There seems to be a decrease of interest in learning English at the level of the 2nd year as compared to the previous years.

4.1.7 Question eight:

For these pupils the most important language skills to be developed are the speaking and reading skills with a preference for the speaking skill (45%) to the reading skill (37%). This may be influenced by the general belief that knowing a foreign language is speaking it.

4.1.8 Question nine:

As for the textbook – *Midlines*- a book published by the Algerian National Pedagogical Institute in 1985; it does not seem to appeal to the pupils who use it, since not even one finds it attractive; 68% find it not very attractive and 32% find that it is not attractive at all.

4.1.9 Question ten:

43% of the respondents found the reading activities, suggested in their text book, interesting and 32% found that they were not very interesting and a small group 25% found them boring.

4.1.10 Question eleven:

The first part of this question represents the core of this investigation; it concerns pupils' opinions about the texts studied so far: 37% of the pupils found them interesting but 40% found them not very interesting and 23% thought that they were boring. The second part concerns the degree of readability of the same texts and more than half of the respondents (60%) did not find much difficulty in understanding them. 11% even found them very easy but there were still 29% who, found them difficult.

4.1.11 Question twelve:

Almost half of the class (44%) considered that the thematic contents were the main negative aspect of the English texts studied in the classroom. For the second half (48%) it was the words complexity which represented a problem for them.

4.1.12 Question thirteen:

A large majority (68%) of the respondents would like to read texts dealing with scientific topics. This may confirm their answers to question three about their favourite reading topic in L₁.It may also be explained by the fact that they are

following a scientific stream in school. Only six pupils prefer texts dealing with social topics. The remaining five pupils who chose other topics showed their interest for sports, pop stars and religion

4.1.13 Question fourteen:

This question was asked to see if the pupils felt more secure when relying on their background knowledge to tackle a text and it proved to be true since 77% preferred to read texts containing some familiar information.

4.1.14 Question fifteen:

As for the text related to topics already studied in other subjects in school, 60% found it was a good idea and proposed titles of lessons mostly of natural sciences such as : Blood and the Circulatory System, The Eye, Human Reproduction ... From the history subjects, the Palestinian issue was suggested and from French, *Le petit prince et le renard*. 40% would not like to read texts dealing with topics seen before in other school subjects.

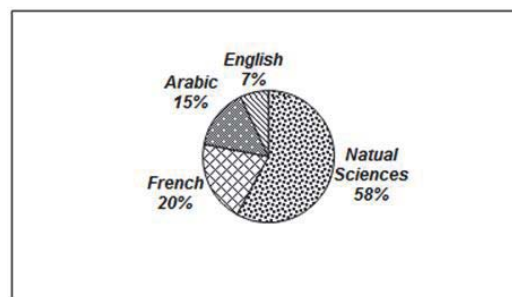
4.2 General Interpretation of Responses

Although it was difficult to draw conclusive results from the pupils' responses, it was revealed that in general pupils do not have a very developed habit of reading in L₁. This confirms that although they come from environment where reading materials exist, they do not read very often. They also do not read for a long time because first they do not read for pleasure (only 15% do) second the reading materials that are the most frequently read are newspapers and school books as it is shown in the following table:

Table 1. Pupils' reading frequency

Reading materials	Percentage of pupils and their reading frequency			
	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Books	11%	34%	31%	24%
Magazines	23%	42%	28%	7%
Newspapers	54%	37%	9%	00%
School books	40%	42%	17%	01%

As it is shown above the most frequently read materials are newspapers, which they find easily at home. This may confirm the high percentage of pupils who read to learn (60%) and for information (22%) and those who chose to read about scientific topics (77%) as opposed to those who read fiction (15%) and for pleasure (15%). It seems that reading for pleasure has not been inculcated to these pupils and even though they read to learn, they are not often asked to read at home 31% in Arabic, 22% in French and 0% in English. This may be explained by the fact that English reading comprehension is usually dealt with in the classroom. However they are asked to learn and they use their school books mainly for this purpose as it is shown in the following pie chart:



Pie Chart 1. Pupils' use of school books at home

It is clear from this pie chart above that the Natural Sciences course book has the largest share, whereas the English one

is the least used one and confirms that pupils use their textbooks to learn from scientific texts revise or do exercises. It was also revealed that in general, pupils have negative attitudes towards the English textbook 68% found it not very attractive. This lack of interest has been detected surprisingly for the English subject itself since 48% found it not very interesting. As far as the reading texts were concerned only 37% found them interesting but 60% did not have much difficulty reading them. It is also confirmed that the choice of text is not congruent with their preferences since 80% prefer reading about scientific topics, which they apparently cannot find in most of the texts suggested to them in the textbook.

4.3 Pupils' Preferences

What was significantly revealing was that a great majority (77%) preferred reading texts, which deal with topics they are familiar with and probably prefer to rely on their knowledge of the world to tackle English texts. That is why 44% of them thought that the English texts were badly chosen as far as the thematic contents were concerned. They may not know anything or very little information about the topics presented through the texts they tackle in their reading comprehension lessons. It is perhaps for this reason that 60% of them found that it would be a good idea to read texts containing information acquired in other school subjects like Natural Sciences.

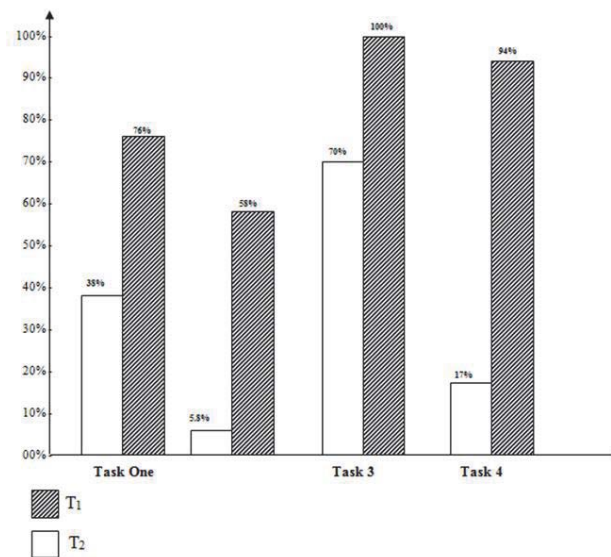
In order to confirm these results and interpretation we are going to turn to the results of the two reading comprehension lessons, and the scores obtained by the pupils in the proposed reading comprehension activities.

4.4 Comparative Study of Pupils Performance in Reading Comprehensions Lessons.

The subjects were presented to two passages to read and four activities to do for each passage. Text one (T₁): *Drilling for Oil* was taken from the pupils' text book (*Midlines*: 144) and text two (T₂): *The main Organ Systems in the Human Body* from an external source (*Inquiring into science* by Jacobson et al, 1985:123) (see appendix II and III for the texts and the reading activities).

For the pre-reading activity which required the pupils to think of words likely to appear in the texts, they could find more words for T₂ than for T₁, some pupils could even think of 15 words of course not all the words were found in the text but all of them were related to the topic like: blood, eyes, health, bones, muscles where as for T₁ the highest score was 10 words among them were: petrol – machine – Sahara. Three pupils could not even think of one word.

As for the reading tasks, the following graph shows the pupils comprehension scores in reading the two texts and doing the four activities.



It seems clear from graph 1 that the pupils performed better the tasks devised for T₂ than for T₁. For task one, which concerned labelling for T₁ the parts of the derrick, and for T₂ the different organs of the human body, the number of pupils who performed completely and successfully the task in T₂ was twice that of T₁.

In task two, pupils were asked to scan the text to find the function of the different parts of the derrick in T₁, and the

function of the different organs in T₂. Only two pupils completed the table successfully in T₁ whereas in T₂ twenty pupils were successful.

The gap was not so wide in task three, where pupils were asked to order sentences to describe the process of drilling in T₁, and the process of digestion in T₂. The whole class completed task three in T₂. It must be admitted that the information required to do this activity were found in the same paragraph.

Vocabulary was easily guessed in T₂ in which 32 pupils found the synonyms for the given words, where as only six pupils were able to succeed in doing task four for T₁.

4.5 Comparative Study of Pupils' Marks

The following table indicates the detailed marks obtained by the 34 pupils who performed the reading activities for T₁ and T₂.

Table 2: Pupils' reading comprehension marks

	From 00 to 07		4 ½ to 9 ½		10		10 ½ to 13 ½		14 and above	
	T ₁	T ₂	T ₁	T ₂	T ₁	T ₂	T ₁	T ₂	T ₁	T ₂
Number or Pupils	14	00	07	00	03	00	04	04	06	30

The marking was done on the basis of the number of the right answers given in each task and the usual scale adopted by the school system where 20 out of 20 is the full mark and 10 out of 20 is the average.

So we can clearly notice that the pupils' interaction with T₁ can be considered as below average and even unsatisfactory since 21 pupils obtained marks below average, among them 14 very poor marks. The standard deviation was evaluated at 3.63; it showed that the pupils' marks were not very homogeneous. On the other hand, marks in T₂ can be considered as excellent since 30 pupils scored higher than 14 out of 20. 5 even obtained the full mark of 20. The marks also showed that the class was more homogeneous since the standard deviation was evaluated at 2.61.

It seems clear that the level of comprehension of T₂ is well above the one of T₁, but what is significant is the big difference in two tasks: if for task one (labelling) and task three (ordering sentences) the difference is not very wide, it is actually much wider in task two (giving function of parts / organs) and task four (finding synonyms). It must be mentioned that these tasks required a more scanning type of reading and some existing knowledge of the topics.

The results yielded by the collected data were admittedly predictable since pupils are usually interested to read only if a topic appeals to them and holds their attention. However, what is worth mentioning is the number of pupils showing negative attitudes towards texts they have been using: 63 % of them do not see any need nor interest in reading them apart from the fact that they are asked to do it by the teacher.

Two other figures are worth mentioning 77 % prefer reading about topics they are familiar with, and 60 % prefer reading about scientific topics.

The most important and highest figure was 94% of the pupils who judged the text dealing with a topic related to a lesson previously studied in their biology lesson, as more interesting. They showed positive attitudes towards reading it, performed better scores and produced very few errors.

The results yielded from the pupils' responses and reading comprehension scores confirmed the hypotheses that readers may show more positive attitude towards texts that deal with topics that are appropriate to their ages, educational levels and interests. The results may also confirm the facilitating effects of pupils' existing background knowledge on their reading comprehension of a text.

5. Conclusion

These results may seem "obviously" predictable but the aim of this study (although limited to a group of 35 pupils) is also to provide quantitative evidence that our young readers are more accustomed to reading for information (in L1.) than for pleasure . So they may be more interested to read texts which present new information on topics appropriate to their educational level and background knowledge.

It is also assumed that the most common knowledge pupils, in secondary schools, share is knowledge acquired (in L1) from school, subjects such as: natural sciences, literature, geography and history. Since the school is part of the pupils' real world, it should be sensible then to associate F-L; reading materials, with areas represented by the other

subjects in the school curriculum. This will perhaps confirm what Grabe and Carrell (1988) verified about the facilitating effects of background knowledge on readers' interaction with a text.

Research on this aspect of the reading skill may open an avenue towards the design of an E.F.L reading program for secondary school pupils. This program should take into consideration pupils' interests and background knowledge for the selection of reading materials to the reading in the English classroom. It should also adopt a content based approach to the teaching of reading. This approach is more "open" than the cross-curriculum one in the sense that it is not restricted to the topics related to school subjects but it allows the teacher to select any topic his pupils would like to know about.

This program will contain texts that may challenge pupils' linguistics skill, but carefully planned reading tasks would help them acquire linguistic and reading skills through interesting content. This will perhaps satisfy their curiosity, generate pleasure and make them more knowledgeable. The secondary school pupils will perhaps develop more positive attitude towards English language learning, because they will feel its relevance to their real world and their future studies. They would also feel that the reading skill in English is an indispensable requisite to have access to the tremendous amount of knowledge and information disseminated nowadays by books and magazines and rapidly by Internet.

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