Some benefits of choosing authentic literature and using online technologies to improve reading ability in EFL learners

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This paper is divided into two sections. The first deals with why we may want to use authentic literature, in particular short stories, in EFL language classes. The second explains how we can take advantage of promising new online technologies such as Spreeder, Moodle and desktop capture software like QuickTime to help students improve their reading ability and promote autonomous learning.

Introduction

Except for the very few among us who are fortunate enough to teach gifted students in the very best universities, our students tend to be those who have had very little exposure to any foreign language literature. Moreover, most of them are very weak readers. Indeed, a perennial problem in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms is that due to this weakness, it limits what we can offer them. This is not due to a glaring lack of learning ability, but more often than not, simply the case of EFL students never having had enough or proper instruction about how to read efficiently and not having been given the means to practice regularly. As a result, we have to teach such students from scratch. While onerous, in fact this actually represents a tremendous opportunity for us to slowly introduce them to captivating literature and get them hooked on reading. At the same time, now that we are able to integrate new technologies specific to reading, it will help them learn how to read effectively. That is, faster and with improved understanding. With effort and planning we can try to initiate, innovate and enrich students' reading experience by creating a new, blended reading teaching paradigm that incorporates the judicious use of technologies.

The Case for Using Short Stories

No matter whether it is called a *conte*, *cuento*, *kurzgeschichte* or *duanpianxiaoshuo* (短篇小), short stories are universally appreciated. Of course the main appeal of short stories to students is that they are short. Students will likely not be afraid to try to read when they can actually see the entire story on one or two pages. Like a police procedural TV program, for example, they know what to expect: there is a beginning, middle and an end. In most cases, and definitely insofar as the classics are concerned, the authors have paid close attention to every word, so language tends to be precise, and have tried to make their stories entertaining in a variety of ways. There is a lot of semantic and grammatical quality packed into a small space. Because short stories are usually very well crafted, students tend to be motivated to continue reading them to the end in order to find out what happens. For example, in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," many readers find the precise description of the killer's mounting guilt to be addictive. And in just two pages, in "The Filipino and the Drunkard," Saroyan creates a morality play.

As short stories are read to be enjoyed, especially when self-selected, most students will not merely go through the motions of reading (see Lao & Krashen below), whereas with many textbook passages, they already know that, in spite of sometimes interesting and well-conceived content, the real reasons for reading are vocabulary study, comprehension, grammar analysis, and eventual testing. In other words, they know that reading a short story or other (authentic) material is for pleasure, so they

feel free to engage with the content naturally, safe in the knowledge that not a single short story will be followed up with vocabulary, comprehension or grammar exercises for testing purposes.

Support for the preceding is detailed in Lao and Krashen (2000) where they examined the impact of popular literature study on literacy development in EFL. They reviewed a variety of studies where students were given opportunities to read freely, not only using the instructors' materials. In *all* cases, using literature, especially popular literature, resulted in reading gains and positive self-assessments, especially for students who read self-selected readings along with well-assigned readings that were selected to appeal to students' interests and reading ability, rather than a "one size fits all" textbook. In their study the experimental group that was able to self-select and read freely scored substantially higher than the comparison group that was "enrolled in a typical academic skills development course" (p. 264). In addition, the experimental group showed substantial improvement in reading speed, whereas the comparison group did not. Although this was not a longitudinal study that tracked multiple cohorts, the authors still asserted that "the differences in gains between the two groups is evident . . ." (p. 267). In spite of some unbalance between the two groups, they seemed confident that their results were fair and accurate. Similar to other studies, the students examined by Lao and Krashen reported they had very strong beliefs that reading for pleasure was valuable. Specifically, 87 students in their experimental group replied "Yes" to the question "Are you more interested in pleasure reading after taking this course?" Only four said "No." By contrast, none of the 39 students in the comparison group that were in a traditional academic skills development course using traditional materials believed that reading for pleasure had much value. Thirty-two said "No" and seven replied, "I don't know" (p. 267). Answering the question "Is pleasure reading a better approach to acquiring English than formal instruction?", 85 out of 91 students in the experimental group answered "Yes". Six responded in the negative and only one person didn't know. In the comparison group, the results were reversed: four said

"Yes," eight said "No" and 27 replied that they didn't know. In a metaanalyis on the effects of reading for pleasure on language learning Lindsay (2010) found that the conclusions reached by Lao and Krashen in their study are supported by the results of other studies that have been done in this field.

Moving away from empirical research, educators such as Krashen (2000), Erkaya (2005) and Hwang (2005) have anecdotally delineated the value of authentic literature and short stories.

- Authentic literature is valuable for getting a genuine sense of language and culture.
- As per Bloom's taxonomy, the subject matter can foster higher-order critical thinking.
- In the case of classics, students may already have some background knowledge of the story, making reading in English less daunting for them. Some will have read Poe, Maupassant, O'Henry, Hemingway, or Mansfield in Japanese. Myths, fables, fairy tales and detective stories will also be familiar in content and form.
- Short stories are manageable in length and promote a *holistic* view of language. Students are reading the story to find out what happens, whereas when reading a typical textbook passage, a narrow view is the norm because they are dissecting meaning, and quite likely have been explicitly told to do so.
- Literature is seen to have more value, to be more prestigious than reading textbooks, which tend to be artificial, often using caretaker English.
- Short stories are neither examples of extensive reading, nor are they, strictly speaking, intensive reading. Because they have elements of both, they are ideal for vocabulary study and grammar focus, yet are also efficient as catalysts for further reading or perhaps as bridges to extensive reading.
- Short stories can motivate students to discuss and write. For example, I have had regular, long-term success with "The Filipino and the Drunkard" by William Saroyan and "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson. In the case of advanced learners, year after year, they cannot wait to convincingly present their arguments and debate with those who have differing opinions, including me. After

they have done some detailed, sentence-level analysis, some of my students become fascinated with not only the story, but also the impact of subtle (to them) grammar on meaning. In this sense, these stories are successful in stimulating critical thinking about behaviour and grammar. These stories also arouse interest and bring about considerable positive effort among low-intermediate learners who struggle to negotiate meaning because they strongly want to offer an opinion. "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Pit and the Pendulum" and the "Murders in the Rue Morgue" by Poe have all led to discussion, short essays, the exploration of descriptive language and even drama.

The Advantages of Using Technologies to Improve Reading Ability and Accessibility

Having established the validity of using level-appropriate short stories and authentic literature, I will show how available technologies are a boon to instructors who want to take students to the stage where they can independently interact with actual literature. One obstacle, however, is that some educators frequently bristle when the topic of using technology is brought up. It can be a polarizing topic where "claims showing exaggerated 'awe' at a new technology's potential, are frequently matched by exaggerated 'fear'" (Bax, 2011). At my own university, we have a state of the art, custom-designed Moodle system with full training and support available to all instructors. Moodle is a powerful online Learning Management System (LMS) that can be used to complement regular classroom practices. In addition to enabling instructors to create and upload a plethora of different materials and courses individually and together, it lets them organise, observe and measure students' online course performance. Our system is fully compatible with smartphone users. In spite of providing comprehensive training sessions and demonstrating the ways it can complement the traditional "chalk and talk" approach, after 2.5 years, it is only being used by ten professors, six of whom are in the English department. Yet our students are 21st century digital natives (Bibby, 2011; Prensky, 2005),

many of whom expect and appreciate an online or computer-based component in their courses, so it behooves us to embrace technology. Embracing technology may have even more significance in Japan where many institutions need to capitalize on every opportunity to differentiate themselves from their competitors in order to remain viable.

New smartphones and tablets are very smart indeed, as will become clear in the section dealing with setting up speed reading online. In an "Introduction: technology in teaching literature and culture: some reflections," Porter (1999) states that "Technology can give students a greater degree of control over the delivery of their learning: by using technology, students can access information, learning spaces, and other resources at times which suit their lifestyle and their other commitments." She adds that "Technology-based resources can be integrated into a course of study and used to complement classroom contact." Bibby (2011) also explains that students prefer to use their cell phones for online activities.

It is very easy to find many suitable, well-known stories online such as at searchlit.org and www.short-stories.co.uk. Thus, in addition to paper (still preferred by many), making a story accessible by putting it online has never been easier. These days most people have a phone, an iPad or a computer with them most of the time. This is especially true in the case of young people (Bibby, 2011). Therefore it is easy *and likely* that instructors will increase a student's contact time with the L2 by making materials available online, particularly if the materials can be viewed on a smartphone. For sceptics, ample statistics below from weak learners fully substantiate these assertions. Even the very weakest students at my institution regularly access our Moodle site. It should be noted that according to the Japanese education ranking hierarchy, all students at this university are classified as weak. Therefore, even weak, mostly unmotivated students will use online materials.

According to the data from our Moodle server, in January 2012 there were 30,287 hits by 927 students. By January 2013, there were 112,129 hits by almost the same number of students. Students even continued to access the Moodle site in February,

after the semester had finished. In February 2012 there were 3492 hits and in February 2013 there were 5209 hits. Finally, well after the end of semester, by the end of March 2012 there were 169 hits, all of which were in my short story section. As of this writing, on March 3, 2013, the same section has already received 104 hits. Indeed, we have found that after each semester approximately 60 students regularly access and reaccess materials during the semester breaks. As students have become familiar with the site and as our content has expanded and improved, usage has increased. On average, when classes are in session, our site gets approximately 60,000 to 65,000 hits per month, most of which are related to English courses. This seems to suggest that even weak students do not mind using online technology. Our students do not mind reading short stories online. This bodes very well for using certain technologies to improve students' reading ability. In addition, by using a Moodle website for reading short stories, instructors can better understand their students' habits because, when files are uploaded to a Moodle website, extensive data mining is possible.

I have suggested above that some instructors are reluctant to adopt new technologies. This reluctance is usually out of fear that learning new procedures will be too complex or that preparing materials online will be too time consuming. In fact, the technology used to improve students' reading ability is easy to use except for the actual, original set up of a Moodle server, which does require specialist knowledge. While it is advantageous to use Moodle, it is by no means mandatory. In the next section I will explain how to set up an online speed reading system, but the objective does not necessarily have to be speed reading. Using the system to improve reading fluency could be an equally valid purpose.

Setting Up Speed Reading Online

First of all, instructors need to find a suitably interesting, level-appropriate story, such as from *Fifteen Little Stories For English Language Learners* by Gregg McNabb, a collection of low-intermediate, mostly light-hearted stories ranging from about 800 to 1800 words, that focuses on vocabulary

development without letting too many new words obstruct the goal of reading for pleasure. Then they can save the story in Word or another common format for future use. At this point, the instructors can upload it to their website as a stand alone file that students can access any time. Many are already doing this. For instructors who do not have a website, it is extremely easy, free and even enjoyable to create one at Weebly.com. It is totally compatible with smartphones. There is also Weebly for Education, which is also free. In addition, by paying a nominal annual amount, Weebly.com provides features that permit data mining. Even without any website at all, instructors with a Gmail account can upload files to Google docs, which is easy to access.

The next step is to practice speed reading the selected story or reading it for fluency. Spreeder is free online speed reading software. It is extremely easy to use. My students were using it within five minutes. Before introducing students to Spreeder so that they can improve their reading speed, first, instructors need to practice with it. At www.spreeder.com, paste the previously saved story into the window. After "spreed!" has been clicked, the story will appear according to the default reading speed (the default setting is 300 words per minute (wpm)). Spreeder parameters may need to be adjusted based on the complexity and flow of the story. Chunk size can be changed according to students' levels. For example, five-word chunks will be appropriate for one story, but six-word chunks may suit another. 135 wpm might be suitable for Hemingway's "Old Man at the Bridge," but perhaps only 100 wpm would be optimal for *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. It is possible to set font size, colour, background, alignment, and window dimensions. There are even several, simple "advanced" settings, such as adding a slight pause at the end of sentences and paragraphs.

Once instructors have learned how to use Spreeder, they will show students what to do. After students have been instructed how to use Spreeder, they should be encouraged to read the story again and again until reading becomes automatic at a particular rate. I have found that reading and rereading individual paragraphs, as opposed to reading the full

story, is preferred by weak readers. Setting targets of reading X times per week at X wpm will put some positive stress on students to strive to attain a goal, but this should be balanced by free reading opportunities ,so that reading does not become reduced to a set of tasks assigned by the instructor. Depending on the students, an element of competition could be introduced by rewarding those who improve their reading speed the most by setting a challenging wpm target. The main objective, however, should first be to improve automaticity in reading.

By using a computer in class, the instructor can follow up on students' progress by having them read in class from a large screen or from monitors. This is good pedagogy in that *the instructor* can set the pace. Reluctant readers will be forced to read in chunks for 2-3 minutes, instead of word by word for 20 minutes. Actually, it is a very positive thing to demonstrate to reluctant readers that they are reading multiple times faster than they do normally and that they are mostly "getting" what the chunks and the story mean. Krashen's testing in Lao and Krashen above and my own experiences in the classroom bear this out.

Since I put all of my comprehension questions on our Moodle site, I can determine how well they have understood a story by looking at the overall Practice Quiz results and can even perform item analysis of individual questions. Because they are Practice Quizzes that can be attempted endlessly for a small percentage of their total grade, students tend to do them without extensive preparation. As a result, their first few attempts tend to reflect their actual understanding of the story. Sometimes these data give me insights into what parts or aspects of a story are problematic and therefore need to be addressed in class.

To this point I have explained how to conduct silent reading and control the pace or let students read on their own using technologies, but where there is mild pressure to read faster.

The last stage is to introduce an oral component. The story file should be printed out in a font size that is easy to read. Next, at Spreeder the story needs to be pasted into the window with the desired settings and then read aloud several times. There

will be hesitations and difficulties, so being able to refer to the printed copy helps to produce a more polished reading. Once the story can be performed smoothly, a desktop capture application needs to be opened to make a YouTube style video of the reading while using Spreeder. Most newer computers have this capability. If not, it is easy to download an application. Procedures will vary slightly according to the operating system on the computer, but with a MacBook Pro with QuickTime 10.0, QuickTime 10.0 must be opened. Then after selecting New Screen Recording from the drop-down File menu, the reading should be practiced several times for 20 to 30 seconds. Next, the file(s) should be played back, evaluated and redone if necessary. Next, the entire story can be read or as much as is appropriate for the students. As described in the preceding section, this file (usually in mp4 format) can be uploaded to a website or to Google docs. Students will be able to read and listen to the story at the wpm rate set by the instructor. Of course they can read it silently, too, by turning down the volume. It is possible and preferable to upload several files with different wpm rates so that students can challenge themselves. If the files are uploaded to a Moodle site, when and how many times each student used each file can be checked. If instructors can succeed in getting students to use Spreeder often, the same as with other forms of speed reading programs, there will be improvement. It is also possible to have students record their own reading and submit it as e-homework.

By making story files available online and introducing Spreeder, at the very minimum it will be easier for students to use their smartphone or computer to read whenever and wherever they want. Most likely, however, a whole new dimension to teaching reading will be added because traditional classroom practices will be reinforced when students are able to read and listen to authentic materials numerous times. When various types of comprehension questions are put online that can be accessed at any time, students will be able to check their understanding. Instead of spending just 90 minutes in a week in classroom reading and study, as has been shown above, students will likely engage

with the materials more often.

Conclusion

There is no need for instructors to eschew online technologies due to their perceived lack of confidence. It has been demonstrated that it is neither difficult nor time consuming to adopt powerful new technologies that enhance students' reading opportunities. Blended learning, that is combining traditional classroom practices with new e-learning technologies, has never been easier. By offering students enjoyable, manageable short stories to read and simultaneously hear via new technologies that they can control according to their own schedules, we are moving forward to create a new paradigm for teaching reading, one that will, hopefully, increase students' interest in reading literature.

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