

DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING OF LITERARY TEXTS WITH ACTIVE READING



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Abstract: As reading proficiency is a fundamental skill for academic learning and success, it is essential to be aware of the students' reading habits and skills and consolidate these skills by using appropriate reading strategies, when necessary. This study aims to explore the advantages of active reading strategies in deepening students' understanding of literary texts. The study responds to the increasing concern that the number of students who are not prepared to discuss readings in class is growing.

Keywords: microskills and macroskills in reading, active reading, reading strategies

Introduction

The ability to read has long been recognized as essential for academic and personal development. Gables (2008) claims that it is crucial for students to know how to read and derive meaning from a text if they strive to be successful in today's society. Despite its importance, reading is one of the most challenging areas in language education. According to Pat Hutchings (2015, p. vii) college level reading seems "mostly invisible". The author claims that, institutionally, there are no reading programs as opposed to writing programs and that "instructors do not see student reading in the same way that we see their written pieces". Students of Foreign Languages Departments feel the lack of such reading instruction and most often struggle with understanding authentic literary texts. It is not only the students' linguistic competence or the level of their literary competence that enable readers to process a literary text and derive meaning. Research shows that students' attitude towards reading and their conscious involvement in the process of

reading by using varied reading strategies improves students' understanding of the literary works they read. Researchers agree that awareness and monitoring of one's comprehension processes are critically important aspects of skilled reading. This is especially relevant in relation to Gen-Z readers, who come into the classroom with unique characteristics.

Gen Z students' reading skills and habits

Pew Research Center defines Generation Z as the age group that includes anyone born between 1997 and 2012. This age group was first referred to as post-millennial, iGeneration, and digital natives; however, over the past years, Gen Z has taken hold in popular culture and journalism. Students of the Generation Z have unique characteristics and needs, they have had the internet from a young age, tend to be knowledgeable of technology and social media and developed a shorter (eight seconds) attention span.

Information technology and the media have made students of this age group to read less and get more involved in playing video games, chatting online and spending most of their time in the activities in the social media. Tulgan (2016) reported that the Gen-Z youth highly depend on their devices and internet to find answers to all kind of questions; therefore, they lack critical thinking skills. They turn to their devices every time they need to solve a problem and they have developed no habit of thinking independently. This is a generation with "shallow and wide" thinking, i.e., they lack the ability to reflect.

Research has been carried to study the youth's reading habits and international education organizations carry out tests to evaluate students' reading skills. Hastings and Henry (2006) in Loan (2012) observed that 56% of the students spend less than half an hour a day on reading and 13% of the students are non-readers. Also, research carried out by National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 2008, revealed the reading habits of college students in the United States of America declined to 51.7% compared to 59.8% in 1982. Reports from university and high school instructors notify that student no longer have the patience to read denser, more difficult texts like classic literature from the 19th and 20th

centuries. Another recent study found that over one third of undergraduate students scored at or below 50% on critical reading skills, and there was no significant improvement across class levels, i.e., from first-year students to seniors (Gorzycki, Howard, Allen, Desa, & Rosegard, 2016).

In the Republic of Moldova, the reading skills among 15-year-old students are also poor. Results of the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that 57% of students aged 15 attained at least Level 2 proficiency in reading, which means that these students can identify the main idea in a text of moderate length, find information based on explicit criteria and can reflect on the purpose of texts “when explicitly directed to do so”. Only about 1% of students in Moldova were top performers in reading, attaining Levels 5 or 6, which means they can form a full and detailed understanding of a text whose content or form is unfamiliar, and deal with concepts that are contrary to expectations. This evidence shows poor students’ reading skills in their mother tongue. As teachers of English as a foreign language, we currently have to cope with a greater number of students who are poor readers or even non-readers and who struggle with reading texts in English due to their poor abilities and strategies they already possess from their reading experiences in their native language.

In addition to the students’ poor reading skills and reluctance to reading, there is the issue of lack of focus, poor linguistic and literary competence. When students get to university, they are required to read complex texts and think abstractly about what they are reading and without having knowledge on how to analyze the text carefully they will not find the deeper understanding. The main objective of this study is to explore the benefits of active reading strategies to deepen students’ understanding of literary as well as non-literary texts.

Defining / Understanding literary reading

Reading is a multifaceted interactive process that draws on several cognitive skills, therefore defining reading is not an easy matter. William Grabe (2011) pointed out that it is possible to define reading in one sentence, “Reading is the ability to draw meaning from the printed

page and interpret this information appropriately.” However, he admits the definition “is insufficient as a way to understand the true nature of reading abilities (p.3). According to the author, the definition does not convey the idea that there are a number of ways to engage in reading (purposes of reading); it does not reveal the many skills, processes and knowledge bases that act in combination to create the overall reading comprehension abilities; it does not explain how reading is carried out as a cognitive process.

In literary reading, readers engage with the text to become involved in events, settings, actions, atmosphere, characters, etc. While reading, there are two different types of comprehension, literal and inferential. Literal comprehension is what the students gain from the information that is explicitly stated by the author. Most often, students cope with the literal level of comprehension provided the text, most often non-literary or graded text, matches the level of their linguistic competence. What distinguishes literary texts from other kinds of texts is the way that creative writers use language in very unique, often confusing and ambiguous ways. This is what can frustrate students most about reading literature. In the course of literary reading, students need to think abstractly. Abstract reasoning requires the students to make inferences, provide analysis, make evaluations and draw conclusions. It requires the reader to draw upon prior knowledge and make connections to gain the meaning and think within the text what the author is trying to convey. In other words, readers need to apply what Brown (2004) defined as macro-skills in reading: conclude relationships and connections between events, deduce causes and effects, and detect relationships such as main ideas, supporting ideas, new information, generalizations, and examples. Also, develop and use a series of reading strategies, such as scanning and skimming, detecting discourse markers, guessing the meaning of words from context, and activating schemes for text interpretation.

Studying literature is an effective way of developing active reading skills because the language of literary texts is uniquely designed to stimulate and challenge our imaginations. An effective literary analysis involves active reading and complex reasoning skills. Studying literature (reading it with a purpose) and writing about it are particularly effective

ways of developing complex reasoning skills because literary texts always pose readers with certain kinds of intellectual or interpretive challenges. By asking the very basic question, “What does this mean?” or “How did you get it?”, we are motivated to dig deeper into questions about language, as well as human life and the conflicts and challenges we encounter each day.

Active reading as part of active learning

Research shows that students learn more when they are engaged in active learning. Active learning is based on the theory of constructivism; therefore, it emphasizes that learners construct or build their own understanding. It also links to other theories of learning, like “Learning should be relevant and within a meaningful context”, developed by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, American psychologist and educational reformer John Dewey or Italian educator Maria Montessori. Active learning happens when students participate in their education through activities that enhance learning.

Active reading is the act of reading to understand and evaluate a text and is often described as “reading with a purpose” (<https://help.open.ac.uk/active-reading>). Active reading helps students to involve in deeper engagement with the text by previewing it, linking it with prior experience, taking notes and writing down ideas, asking and answering questions.

A good way to understand active reading is to compare it to its opposite, passive reading.

During Active Reading, students:	During Passive Reading, students:
Adjust how you read depending on the type of text and context within which you’re reading.	Read each text the same way.
Examine the purpose of the assignment before reading.	Read without examining the purpose of the assignment.
Alter your reading speed as you read based on the significance and difficulty of each passage.	Read everything at the same speed.
Preview a text before reading	Don’t preview; just jump right into

by skimming headings, topic sentences, and key words.	reading.
Read with questions in mind.	Read without questions in mind.
Stop to monitor your understanding of the text as you read.	Don't stop to think about whether you are understanding what you are reading.
Annotate while you read: read with a pencil or highlighter in hand to mark important passages and jot down notes.	Don't annotate. Don't have anything in hand. Just read.
Make time to reflect upon and evaluate what you have read.	Don't make time to reflect upon and evaluate what you have read.

There are lots of different ways to develop active readers in the classroom and at home. Neil J Anderson developed an approach based on his belief that “reading is an essential skill for English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) students; ... and the most important skill to master. With strengthened reading skills, ESL/EFL readers will make greater progress and attain greater development in all academic areas” (p. 2). Anderson chooses the word ACTIVE as an acronym that stands for six of the strategies that he considers when teaching an ESL/EFL reading class and focuses on the following elements of active reading:

Activate prior knowledge - activation of background knowledge through visual prompts and questions improves reading comprehension;

Cultivate vocabulary – since vocabulary plays a crucial role in the development of reading ability, vocabulary comprehension exercises are essential to consolidate vocabulary items encountered in the main reading passage;

Think about meaning - the active reading approach encourages learners to think deeply about the meaning of the text. Students may focus on the main ideas and key details of the text answering questions that check understanding or critical thinking questions that require students to go beyond reading comprehension and analyze each text and the author's intent;

Increase Reading Fluency - students get familiar with tips for fluent

reading and are encouraged to become more aware of their own reading habits. Some reading tips the students should be reminded of are: read in phrases rather than word by word, engage one's imagination, don't worry about understanding every word, use clues in the text to make predictions, read as much as you can;

Verify Strategies – with active reading, students are aware of what they are doing and why they are doing it, as they read. Students are familiar with the reading strategies and they can monitor the effectiveness of their own use of strategies.

Evaluate Progress - Neil J Anderson developed qualitative and quantitative evaluation of learners' progress in reading. The *Reading Rate Chart* and the *Reading Comprehension Chart* allow students to plot their achievements in building reading fluency. Students' progress in reading may be assessed through What Do You Think? sections, they provide opportunities for students to show comprehension of the text through verbal or written discussion.

For the purpose of this study, a survey has been carried to identify the reading habits of the students of the foreign languages department at Alecu Russo Balti State University. The scope of the questionnaire was to find out the students' reading preferences as well as whether our students are familiar with and employ any reading strategies as they accomplish their reading assignments.

Thirty students volunteered to respond to the questionnaire, of which 44,8% – students in the first year of their study, 34,5% - 2nd year students, 13,8% - 3d year students and 6,9% - 4th year students. Surprisingly, the questionnaire revealed that 89,7% of respondents read something in English every day compared to 10,3% who don't. Most students (37,9%) enjoy reading novels most, 10,3% - like reading poetry while 27,6% - only read news online and 24,1% did not specify their reading preference. It is also worth mentioning that 96,6% of respondents agree that reading in English is essential to their academic success and there is 3,4% who don't think it is important to read in English to succeed as a student of foreign languages.

However, the questionnaire showed that most students either are not familiar with or do not apply any reading strategies while doing their

reading assignments. Thus, only 13,8% of students always make predictions about what they are going to read before they start reading and only 27,6% think about the purposes of reading. Also, only 20,7% of respondents take notes and write down questions as they read in English and only 24,1% admitted that their understanding of their reading assignment was complete, i.e., class discussions proved that the inferences and conclusions they drew as they read the assignment independently were appropriate. At the same time, 75,9% of the students admitted that their understanding was incomplete, i.e., class discussions helped reveal ideas, inferences and connections they missed while reading at home.

The answers provided by the students in this questionnaire demonstrate that our students read in English every day and believe that reading is essential to their academic success. However, the findings highlight the idea that our students need reading instruction to prepare them for a more engaged and purposeful reading. The students should not only get familiar with reading strategies, such as identify key words, understand the main point, guess the meaning of words from context, etc. They should develop a habit of applying the strategies to enable them with better reading skills. Neil Anderson's strategy of active reading may be applied with students in the first or second year of study to prepare them for literary reading.

The SQ3R reading strategy applied to literary reading

The SQ3R reading strategy is a five-step comprehension strategy developed by Frances P. Robinson in 1961 and provides techniques for students to ensure a higher degree of understanding and remembrance when studying content material. The acronym stands for Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review. The strategy proved efficient in helping students learn through reading. The strategy keeps students actively engaged in what they are reading and may be applied to turn reading into an active learning activity.

Survey – the students take a quick look at the text, the title, the pictures that accompany the text. The purpose of the Survey stage is to give the student an idea of what they are going to be reading, how the

information is organized.

Question – refers to the questions students are going to keep in mind while reading. Students may create their own (prediction) questions or look at the questions that follow or precede the text.

Read – relates to students' reading the text with some questions to answer in their mind. As the students read, they look for major points and ideas, and find answers to questions.

Record – making notes while reading helps students remember the content better. Students will write down details, more questions on the section, key words or phrases that will help identify, prove or justify an opinion or an argument.

Recite – literally, students recite out loud the answers to the questions or they read out loud the notes they made; it is related to better retention of knowledge while speaking or doing.

Review – comes at the end of Reciting as well as a few days later, when students ask those questions again and they make sure that they can answer them.

The SQ3R design can be adapted to be applied to reading literary texts:

Survey: What genre of writing is the work? Is it poetry, fiction or drama? What is the title or subheading? Who is the author? When was the work written? Are there any introductory or concluding paragraphs?

Question: What questions has the teacher raised? What themes and issues have you been discussing in class? Is it possible to change the title or subheading to questions? Can you add other questions? Questions are not restricted to comprehension, but can cover structure, figurative language, plot, characters, point of view, depending on the teacher's objectives and the availability of information required through questions in the reading passage.

Read: Read the text with questions you wrote. Use your questions and the teacher questions so that you select what to annotate, highlight, note take, etc. Consider any italicized, bold printed words or phrases.

Recite: At the end of each section: verse, stanza, scene, act, chapter, etc., orally answer the questions you have raised in your own words without referring to the text. You can write in margin of the text some

notes, or underline / highlight the key words or ideas that help you answer and recite the answers to questions.

Review: Answer the questions about the whole work, write the answers then recite them. Reread any sections to find answers to particularly difficult questions. Write down the major topics and subjects you picked from the text. Briefly summarize, in your own words, key points, key ideas and the answers of the questions. Read weekly, the summaries and answers. Write questions about your notes and summaries likely to have in tests.

Conclusions

Most researchers in the area assert that reading strategies such as Survey Question Read Recite Review (SQ3R) will help learners acquire life-long independent reading habits both for study or pleasure. Moreover, if used consistently and appropriately, they will improve the students' reading abilities whenever confronted with considerably lengthy and challenging texts, particularly literary ones. Thus, it is worth considering that English language teachers include reading instruction and get their students familiar with active reading strategies to help them become better readers and improve their academic achievements.

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