

THE USE OF RESPONSE ACTIVITIES IN DEVELOPING READING SKILLS AMONG INTERMEDIATE EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Reading in an English lesson is an essential activity to develop in order to acquire knowledge, a text will not always help students develop this knowledge by itself; it is the uses of the activities that help students to achieve this point. This research was a case study of the implementation of response activities. The objectives were: To observe how students respond to using authentic written texts in a lesson and to check if by using response activities is possible to have students' positive reaction. The hypothesis was established as follows: Students react positively to the use of authentic written texts in a lesson with response activities. 4 lessons were planned and observed; at the end of each lesson questionnaires to all students and some interviews were applied, all the results from activities were collected. This investigation was developed with students in the 4th semester of the B.A. program in ELT at the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas during their English lessons. A mix-method methodology was used, using quantitative and descriptive qualitative. The hypothesis was accepted and the objectives were reached. So, using response activities and using authentic written texts can help students to show a positive response to reading lessons.

Keywords: *Response Activities, Authentic Texts, Critical Thinking, Positive Response.*

Introduction.

While learning English as a foreign language, many students have few opportunities to experience working with authentic written texts. Besides, most of time the texts are not related to students' life, sometimes is too difficult to understand the messages. So, students end up copying and pasting the answers from the text, only to pass the exams or fulfill the activity.

While learning a foreign language, most of the goals found in a regular reading class are directly concerned with the grammatical aspects or vocabulary acquisition in that lesson. It is not completely wrong, but this method needs more natural language. On the other hand, there is a need of meaningful activities so students can do what they do in real life with a text in L1, with the texts in L2.

Otherwise, the image that students may have about reading in English, then, becomes a frustrating idea, shallow and out of their contexts.

This research seeks into students' reaction to the teaching of reading through authentic material using response activities due to the fact that authentic materials provide students with a practical opportunity to learn in a natural and effective way. Activities play a key role to practice and learn the target language. Instead of using the usual reading comprehension question, the use of reading response activities can challenge students more.

In order to develop this research the following objectives were established: to observe how students responded using authentic written texts in a lesson; and to ensure if by using response activities it was possible to have students' positive reaction. According to previous studies the following hypothesis was established. Students react positively to the use of authentic written texts in a lesson with response activities. Four lessons were planned and observed; at the end of each lesson questionnaires to all students and some interviews were applied, all the results from activities were collected. This investigation was developed with students in the fourth semester of the B.A. program in ELT at the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas during their English lessons. A mix-method methodology was used, using simple quantitative and descriptive qualitative methods. The hypothesis was accepted and the objectives were reached. So, using response activities and using authentic written texts can help students to show a positive response to reading lessons.

Nowadays, some teachers have seen the importance of using reading lessons as a communicative tool to obtain knowledge and cultural capital. So, if we expect to give a language lesson, we should include in our planning of activities some that involve critical thinking. As Brown (cited in Arnold 1998: 235) points out that when incorporating critical thinking in our classrooms, we should be concerned not just about helping our students "to become aware of information" but "to become participants in a global partnership of involvement in seeking solution".

We are all critical thinkers but we do not all have the quality of thinking critically. Harmer (2001:205) defines:

"Authentic material is language where no concessions are made to foreign speakers. It is normal, natural language used by native speakers of a language. This is what our students encounter (or will encounter) in real life if they come in contact with the target language."

Guariento (2001) also mentions: "The use of authentic texts is now considered to be one way of maintaining or increasing students' motivation for learning". Nowadays, taking

advantages of the technology such as internet, it is possible to find practically all the genres such as menus from any country in the world, novels and magazines, articles and so on.

It is necessary to recognize that just by bringing authentic material to the class will not magically do the entire job. As Williams (1984:118) explains “the task itself is interesting and interesting activities that incorporate reading are more likely to lead to a positive attitude to reading.” Therefore, adding authenticity in the activities will help countless to reach one of the goals in today’s teaching towards communicative competence. There must be an interaction between the learners and the text. Sometimes it will be difficult to adapt a class to a text, but there will always be a range of topics that can be chosen to match the students’ contexts and interests.

There are many factors to take into account while selecting material. Dumitrescu (2000) found out that two of the most important factors to take into are applicability which means that the content of the text should be relevant for all the students and adaptability which means that the text can be used for different tasks. Schema is also crucial while deciding which text to bring to class because it is unreasonable to expect that students would learn something that they do not have even a small clue about. Peregoy and Boyle (2005) consider that the reader’s prior knowledge of the passage’s content and familiarity with its genre and the text structure play a major role in comprehension. If students are not used to reading poems we cannot pretend that they are going to interact well with the first poem they read, so training is necessary.

The theory of reader response activities’ origins are in the field of literary criticism; as Hirvela (1996) describes it as a way to challenge learners to be critical about the text. Maley and Duff (cited in Hirvela 1996:127) explain that “The primary aim of our approach is quite simply to use literary texts as a resource...for stimulating language activities...” They also explain that there is an interest in engaging students interactively with the text, with their peers and, and with the teacher in the performance of activities involving literary texts. So, students are induced to pay careful attention to the text itself and to generate language in the process of completing the task. Then, the reading response theory is more than simply bringing a text to the class. It is about planning a lesson with activities that develop critical thinking among students, that engage students with the text and with their surroundings; that help students develop their imagination and to read the text and produce language. Since this

theory stresses the link between reader and text, then a practical application has to be designed based on this interaction.

Reading response activities can help students to understand and create an interest in a text. The main purpose of reading response activities is to obtain a response from the students which is going to make students use the target language without even noticing it. Then, it is possible to obtain a natural, authentic and creative language. Also, this is a way to guide students to a real situation using the language. There is a wide range of activities that can be developed in a reading lesson.

Examples of reading response activities are:

1. *Graphic organizers* are a pictorial way of constructing knowledge and organizing information. They help the student convert and compress a lot of seemingly disjointed information into a structured, simple-to-read, graphic display. The resulting visual display conveys complex information in a simple-to-understand manner. (Col, 1996) Example of Graphic organizers are: Venn diagrams , Semantic mapping, Story maps or character webs and Time lines.
2. *Art projects* are another type of reading response activities, some examples of art projects are collages, murals and posters. To be able to perform an art project it may be need extra material such as paintings, glue, crayon, special paper, etc, may be needed. Example of Art projects are: Collages, Posters and Murals.
3. *Drama* is another example of using response activities; after reading a text. The Exeter University School of Education and Lifelong Learning (2003) explain that drama is a useful tool within the English classroom and can often help to bring life, vitality and creativity into the teaching of English. Peregoyle and Boyle (2005) remark that drama activities offer students activities that involve progressively more participation and oral language proficiency; these kind of activities are also nonthreatening and students may even have fun. Examples are: Puppet shows and TV or radio talk show with invited characters
4. *Writing a Response* is to write something about the text. The activities that can be used are: response to journals, letter to the author, retelling, and rewriting the ending. Examples of this are: Literature Response Journals, Letter to the Author, Retelling and Rewriting the ending.

Methodology

To develop this investigation it was important to establish the objectives of the research. There were two objectives to be achieved during the investigation:

1. To observe how students respond to using authentic written texts in a lesson.
2. To check if by using response activities is possible to have students' positive reaction.

The hypothesis that is been investigated is the following:

1. Students react positively to the use of authentic written texts in a lesson with response activities.

This investigation was developed with students in the fourth semester of the B.A. program in ELT at the Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas during their English lessons. The population considered, according to the hours covered in English learning is placed in an intermediate level. There were 30 students in the class; the group was not representative of the population of the intermediate students at the University, as the sample was chosen by convenience. The reason of choosing this particular group, besides the level, was the fact that the teacher is used to working with authentic material. In addition, he was willing to collaborate, since he knows the importance of doing research and also he was open to collaborate following a planned lesson. He was not used to working with response activities, though.

The instruments were designed after two previous observations and an interview with the teacher. The first impression was that it was a large group that looked very difficult to engage to the activities.

The readings, as the main instrument, were selected. The first criterion was to bring to the class authentic material. My second criterion was to select materials related to the topics that needed to be learned during the semester. Finally, materials according to the age of the students were chosen. Also, different kinds of genres were included, such as a short story ("The house on Mango Street"), articles (about inventions), a poem ("El Día de los Muertos") and a lyric (Imagine).

The following step was the design of the four lesson plans which played an important role in this work, since they were the teacher's guide and the basis for the collection of the data needed to carry out this investigation. These lessons took two classes of 50 minutes each.

The four lessons and the reading response activities were designed as follow:

1. "The House on Mango Street", (Cisneros, 1984). The response activities were: a questionnaire to check understanding and promoted critical thinking. A vent-diagram to compare the ideal house and the actual house.
2. 8 different readings all related to inventions. The response activities were: Write an e-mail (to promote understanding), act out an advertisement (to promote creativity).
3. "Dia de los Muertos" by Delgado (1994). The response activities were: Discuss ideas about culture (Critical Thinking), Make a poster (Creativity) and Write "calaveritas" (humorous poem which is talks about the death) using Spanglish (Creativity and Critical Thinking).
4. "Imagine" by John Lennon (1988). The response activities were: Discussion social issues such as war and hunger (Critical Thinking), write a letter to John Lennon (Critical Thinking) and write a poem using the last sentence of the lyric "and the world will live as one" as reference (Creativity).

Then, the observation sheet was designed to observe 5 students at the same time, and it had room to include the stage of the lesson and the time of starting. It helped to observed the following aspects: *Paying attention*, *"On-task" or "off-task"*, *Doing the activities as requested*, *Participating in the lesson (describing its content*, *Collaborating in the activities (describing it) and Attitudes and Gestures*.

The next step was to develop a questionnaire; questions 1 and 3 are closed questions; numbers 2, 4 to 9 are open questions where students had to explain the reasons for their answers.

1. Questions 1, 2 and 5 are about the written text.
2. Questions 3, 4 and 6 were about the activities presented in the lesson.
3. Questions 7 and 8 were about students' involvement with the lesson.
4. Question 9 was about students' interest and motivation about the topic.

The interview consisted in 9 questions as well:

1. Question 1 was about the general idea students have about the reading class;
2. Question 2 was about what they thought about the lesson presented.
3. Questions 3 and 4 were about the text.
4. Questions 5 and 6 were about the activities presented in the lesson.
5. Questions 7 asked if they learned something new from the lesson.

6. Question 8 asked students to think in the differences between a text from a book and the text presented.
7. Finally, question number 9 was about students' involvement and participation in the lesson.

Four lesson plans were completely taught by the teacher. The questionnaires were handed out to the students immediately after each lesson was finished. The interviews were done after each lesson too; most of them were done at the end of the day when students had the time. There were four students interviewed for each lesson. Two of them were students that were also observed, and the other two were selected at random. The answers were written down students were asked if what it was written was exactly what they meant. The observations were done the days that the lesson plans were presented. It is important to highlight that some of the students observed the first day of the lesson did not come to the class the following day, so only the ones that did participate in the whole lesson were taken into consideration, as data to analyze.

First, since this is a mix-method research the data was divided and analyzed in quantitative and qualitative data. The questions were the quantitative data, and the answers were counted and a simple percentage was taken from them.

The Qualitative data was taken from: The observations, interviews and results from the activities. The data analysis strategy chosen for the data qualitative, before a report can be made, is the one presented by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006): Prepare the data for analysis (organize the data), Data exploration phase (Reading, thinking and making notes) and Data Reduction phase (Select the relevant data and assign a label). The observations, interviews and results from the activities. After this the conclusions and the report will be made.

Findings and Discussion of The Results

Students had no problems understanding authentic material according to the information gathered from the questionnaires (In all the lessons presented around the 63% of the students understood the text except from the third lesson were 80% students reported to have understood) and the interviews, where students showed that they understood most of the texts: the main reason was that the texts were at their proficiency level. Then it is important to choose the text carefully. The following variables were taken into account to be able to determine if there was a positive response:

1. Willingness to read more about the topic

Not all the students were usually interested in the topic, but students have recalled, in the questionnaires (39%) and the interviews, that the activities made them feel interested in the topic. Therefore, while planning the lesson, it is easier when you bring topics to class that students are interested in because they can talk about their experiences in the themes. Students reported that have a relation with the students' real lives. Students reported that one of the things that they liked about the text was that they were able to compare them with personal situations or experiences.

2. Interest

To create interest is not always easy, but if we try to observe what kind of activities they enjoy then, it becomes easier; one method is by bringing different activities and verifying if they work. Deciding to bring activities were students could have fun (24%) and use their own ideas (16%). felt freer to express themselves and students could use the language as a tool to express ideas.

3. Knowledge acquired

Students reported that they did acquire knowledge. The questionnaires (67%) and the products showed that students did in fact. One example was when students wrote an e-mail about the inventions they had read about. They not only wrote about what they had learned but also they gave their own personal opinions about the inventions.

4. Meaningful learning

Students experienced the acquisition of meaningful learning when they reported that they felt the readings and the activities had a relationship with their lives (39%). Florence (1995) mentions in her description of authentic material, aspects and patterns of language are learned within meaningful contexts. That is why it is clear to use response activities when the objective of the class is to practice the language and learn it in a meaningful way.

5. Being "on-task"

Students were not "on-task" all the time while the lesson was developed; but most of them were "on-task" while doing the response activities. The challenge that students found in the activities helped them to be "on-task". It is important to know why students get "off-task" and try to engage them by challenging them more. It is important to

remark that reading response activities helped to get students “on-task”; as it challenges learners to be critical about the text

Conclusions

Objective 1. To observe how students respond using authentic written texts in a lesson.

Students’ response to the use of authentic written texts was positive since they understood the main ideas of the text; since the vocabulary was known or well introduced, students also helped each other with possible doubts; they also asked the teacher to explain some unknown words. Also, students expressed in the interviews and the questionnaires that they liked the idea of reading authentic material since they were exposed to real life issues. It is true that not all of the students were interested in reading more about the topics presented, but it is important to state that some of them were interested, which shows that students are willing to read more and learn about a topic using English as a tool. Students did not have problems in reading the text in different styles and formats since they are familiar with all these from their experience in real life.

Objective 2. To check if by using response activities it is possible to have students’ positive response.

It is true that the use of response activities helped students to show a positive response; they were willing to read more about the topic; they did acquire meaningful learning since they expressed that they felt they could relate the topics to their own lives. Students also showed that they had acquired knowledge, as they reflected it in their activities. Moreover, based on the interviews, students showed interest in the topics, in the lessons and in the activities. Here, it is important to mention that the students were not “on-task” all the time as the activities requested concentration and a mental process, but not all the students worked at the same rhythm, so some were “off-task” as soon as they finished doing the activities, others could not help themselves joking around; but all the students did the activities and helped doing the group activities although it was impossible to maintain every single student “on-task” all the time.

In regards to the hypothesis being investigated, the conclusion based on the results obtained, the interviews, the questionnaires and the products of the lesson plans, there is clear evidence that students showed positive response to the use of authentic written texts in a lesson using response activities. Here, the main thing to highlight is that students enjoyed

reading authentic written texts since they felt they were reading real life texts; plus they worked within meaningful context. Also, most of the students were not used to developing this kind of activities in an English reading lesson. For this, the teacher was an important part in the development of this investigation since the teacher tried hard to perform the activities as they were planned and he added a positive motivation to the lesson. Also, the use of response activities helped to achieve students' positive response, as the main purpose of the reading response activities is to obtain a reaction from the students in order to make students produce the target language.

Peregoy and Boyle (2005) mentioned that the ideal reader is one who is an independent reader "one who responds to literature individually and shares responses with others, listens to others' viewpoints and adjust interpretations, and uses information in a literary text to support interpretations, but remains open to interpretation of others." At some point, these students behaved as this "ideal reader", since they did everything mentioned by Peregoy and Boley and that was mainly due to the use of careful planned response activities.

Pedagogical Suggestions

To be able to use reading response activities it is necessary first to have clear goals to be achieved. Otherwise it will be very difficult to see if there was a kind of success. Second it is important to train students to develop the activities, especially if they are not familiar with this kind of activities or they do not know exactly what the purpose of the activity is. Otherwise it is going to be difficult to achieve success while performing them since students will develop the activities but they might not have the same effectiveness.

There are also some other points to take into account while planning to use response activities; for instance time: to find a written text, to prepare the lesson, to train students to develop the activity, to pre-teach vocabulary if it is needed and to check students' works. Another factor to take into account is students' schemata; to take advantage of them and bring texts and activities where students can use their schema. As Selden (cited in Hirvela 1996:128) observes, "We can no longer talk about the meaning of a text without considering the reader's contribution to it". So, it is very necessary to do small research about students' previous knowledge.

Also, it is necessary to mention that most of the time the answers will vary from student to student, depending on the kind of activity requested. Sometimes students will hesitate

while doing an activity because they are not used to this kind of exercises where there might not be a correct answer, only answers. Therefore, it is required to establish a pattern if it is necessary to give a grade to the work done; it is highly recommend to use response activities as a way to show students that they are able to produce language. As Paul (2004) explains that quality thinking has to do not only with students asserting things but mainly making students reflect on the facts and the causes of the content of what they are reading about.

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