

Reading as a literacy practice: students' self-perceptions towards it

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Abstract

This case study research project was designed to describe the different perceptions and attitudes that English students of first and second level at a public university have about their reading process and to analyze how these perceptions affect the reading activity they develop in their performance as university students. The guiding question of the study deals with the effect of EAP students' perceptions on their reading commitment as readers. The materials and activities used in the research, stress the importance of linking students' attitudes to classroom practice and further changes in the reading activity in academic settings. The results of the study show that teachers play an important role in the students' motivation with regards to reading and the students make commitments to themselves to become good readers due to the consciousness that their teachers have created.

Key words: reading, perceptions, commitment, motivation, academic setting, influence.

Palabras claves: lectura, percepciones, compromiso, motivación, contexto académico, influencia.

Resumen

Este proyecto de investigación de caso de estudio fue diseñado para describir las diferentes percepciones que tienen los estudiantes de primer y segundo nivel de Inglés en una universidad pública, acerca de su proceso de lectura en su desempeño como estudiantes universitarios. La pregunta guía del estudio trata sobre el efecto de las percepciones de los estudiantes de Inglés para Propósitos Académicos, en su compromiso como lectores. Los materiales y actividades usados en la investigación, enfatizan la importancia de conectar las percepciones y actitudes de los estudiantes a la práctica del salón de clase y los posteriores cambios en la actividad de la lectura en contextos académicos.

Los resultados del estudio, demuestran que los profesores juegan un papel importante en la motivación de los estudiantes con respecto a la lectura, y los estudiantes tienen compromisos así mismos para llegar a ser buenos lectores debido a la conciencia que sus profesores les han creado.

Introduction

Reading in Spanish and English has been an essential activity in the academic context, not only in schools but also in universities, especially with regards to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. Through reading, students have the opportunity to discover new and interesting topics which permits them to reinforce and complement the knowledge, they already have of different subjects.

This study on students' perceptions and attitudes towards reading, gives an analysis of the students views towards it. Some academic tenets of motivation towards reading, mainly those related to the level that students portray during their classes, especially when they have to do it as an academic fulfillment or for another reason, were which motivated me to do this study.

Literature Review

Over many years the concept of reading has been analyzed and defined by many authors from their own point of view: Nuttal (1982), defines this activity as: "Reading means getting out of the text as nearly as possible the message that the writer put into it" (p. 5), Grellet (1981) says "Reading is a constant process of guessing, and what one brings to the text is often more important than one finds in it" (p. 7) However, all these concepts share a similar viewpoint, that being, the interpretation of symbols and message of the writer and constructions of meaning. Nevertheless, reading is not merely about interpreting letters, words and phrases

or obtaining meanings, but is also an enjoyable process in which a person can change his/her own perception about life and his/her feelings as a human being, since reading is also related to socio-cultural realities that can transform human beings into reflective people useful for a society.

According to the concepts of the above authors, the purpose of reading is not only to understand the message of the author, but also to obtain the details of the reading, the main ideas and its complements. However, there are other authors that define reading as a process in which the reader can make sense of the written or printed symbols and to use this information to construct a message. (Dubin and Eskey, 1986, p. 27). That is to say, in the reading process it is very important to take into account the input of what the reader has in his/her mind so as to make the comprehension of a text easier, and in this way, to make a personal interpretation according to the reader's concepts and beliefs.

Furthermore, in the reading process, the reader also needs to construct a meaning of what he/she can interpret by him/herself according to his/her own experiences and knowledge in order to make sense of the process. Anderson (1999) asserts something about it: "Reading is an active, fluent process which involves the reader and the reading material in building meaning. Meaning does not reside on the printed page, nor is it only in the head of the reader. A synergy occurs in reading which combines the words on the printed page with the reader's background knowledge and experiences" (p. 1).

Motivation and reading motivation

In the common context of all knowledge fields, everyone both adults and children have been motivated towards achieving specific things such as obtaining a degree, traveling, knowing a person, being the best, among others. A human being is motivated because he/she has a purpose in mind in order to obtain his/her aims and therefore to receive different personal benefits.

Referring to these benefits, persons can enhance their level of motivation according to their own experiences when these are positive for them. Brown gives a definition from the dictionary about the concept of motivation: "Motivation is the extent to which you make choices about (a) goals to pursue and (b) the effort you will devote to that pursuit". (1994, p. 34).

In relation to reading motivation in the educational context we frequently observe that young students are more motivated to read. When students begin their first level of primary education, it's very common to see that they like reading. That is to say, they feel a great pleasure when they read. With the passing of time, these same students do not like to read with the same pleasure and others even hate this literacy activity.

However, there are a lot of reasons why these readers do not like this activity: some adults see this activity as a difficult task because they got a negative feedback from their teachers when they were children, that is to say, some were not encouraged by their teachers to read and others did not have the opportunity to be involved in this activity because their parents did not motivate them.

Consequently, when adults have this prejudice in their mind they feel demotivated and therefore they do not have any desire to read and comprehension of a text becomes a

difficult problem to solve. Goodman et al (1987) suggest that "It is not enough to build the ability to read; schools must also be concerned with whether pupils will want to read. Too many adults can read but don't choose to do it because they learned in school to think of reading as tedious and difficult-something only to do when they had to" (p. 258).

My own experience as a teacher has also shown, that most students at the university level consider this activity boring and difficult; a problem that can become more complex if we include the lack of high self-esteem produced by low self-confidence in their reading skills. Consequently, it makes them feel like bad readers. That is, in other words, the motivation that some students experience towards reading, is lower, due to the fact that they feel incapable of doing this activity in the best way, in order to obtain the main purpose of it, so as to get the main information of a text.

According to Purcell-Gates, (2001, cited in Flippo), "the factors of engagement and motivation are particularly crucial when considering readers who struggle. These readers seldom perceive themselves as readers; nor do they perceive themselves as capable of learning to read and write. Their difficulties, which for most of them began during their first years of schooling, have convinced them that reading is a difficult, unsatisfying, and unpleasant activity". (p. 126).

Other students, on the contrary, like this activity very much and feel motivated to read. These readers consider that through reading, they have the opportunity to learn many new things and see this activity as being very important for their lives, because they can increase their knowledge and in this way, they have the opportunity to exchange many ideas with others.

Gambrell, cited in Flippo (2001), asserts: "Highly motivated readers generate their own reading opportunities. They want to read and

choose to read for a wide range of personal reasons, such as curiosity, involvement, social interchange, and emotional satisfaction" (p. 30).

Furthermore, there are many students who say that reading is not only a way to acquire a lot of information that permits them to increase their knowledge, but also, it is a means by which they can find an opportunity to enjoy it, to feel delight and to have a good time, that is, this is the perception about reading from the view of it being a pleasurable activity. Anderson (1999), also claims that: "when readers read for information, they approach the text with the goal of being able to gain new information or to increase their learning. Reading for pleasure provides many readers an opportunity to relax and enjoy the world of books. For both reasons, readers expect to be able to comprehend the material being read and to reach their purposes". (p. 100).

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

In all learning processes, students are constantly influenced by two kinds of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Many students in the academic context have to read for many reasons: to pass an exam, to present a work, to carry out an assigned task, and so forth. That is, there are many external factors that involve the reading activity. All these factors refer to extrinsic motivation.

Guthrie and Wigfield (1997), define extrinsic motivation as: "a person's being prompted to engage in an activity by an incentive or anticipated outcome that is external to the activity". (p. 87). That is, when a student is aware that if he/she receives a reward, for example a good mark through reading, then he will be motivated to do this activity.

On the other hand, there exists other kinds of factors that gives a reader pleasure in reading. In other words, when a reader actually reads, it is due to the voluntary wish to do it. He/she considers it a pleasure, a great wish that makes

him/her feel very good. Intrinsically, he/she is conscious of the benefits that he/she receives when he does this activity.

Through reading, the reader feels comfortable like when he watches a football game, a movie or when he eats a delicious dish. This is intrinsic motivation. Guthrie and Wigfield, (1997), claims that "...a person's inner desire to engage in an activity, regardless of whether the activity has an external value" (p. 87). On the other hand, Anderson (1999), addresses some issues about these kinds of motivation: "extrinsic motivation is derived from external or outside factors; intrinsic motivation is internal, springing from inside the student" (p. 3).

It is very important for teachers to encourage their students during the reading process in their classes, especially when they notice that intrinsic motivation is present. It allows them to experience great pleasure in reading and consequently to see this activity as one of the most important factors in their learning and comprehension process.

Gambrell, cited in Flippo (2001) makes a contribution related to the issue: "Because of the powerful influence that motivation plays in early literacy learning, teachers are more interested than ever before, in understanding the relationships that exist between motivation and literacy development, and in learning how to help all students achieve the goal of becoming effective, lifelong readers" (p. 129). In like manner, it is important to bear in mind the perceptions and attitudes students demonstrate, in relation to the reading activity in order that teachers may understand their students in a better way that benefits the learning process.

Perceptions towards reading

The perceptions that students have about learning and more specifically about reading, play an important role in the motivation they have to practice reading. Social, familiar and

academic contexts present in our environment have an influence on the reading activity of a person. These contexts play an important role in the students' motivation to read or not or in some cases, these contexts influence the different perceptions that the students have, about reading in a positive or negative way.

The social environment is an important context on the influence of reading. Sometimes, when people listen to the news on T.V. or radio about any specific topic, they feel more motivated to broaden their knowledge on this topic and they do this through reading.

The family context, is another decisive factor in reading. For instance, in some cases, a student can receive influences from his/her family. It is very common to hear that there are many students who are good readers because they have followed the influence of their parents who constantly read very much. These students generally like to read about the same topics their parents read. However, in other cases, there are students who are bad readers and do not experience a lot of motivation to read, because their parents never read and do not influence their children in the practice of this activity. Hence, these students are not conscious of the importance it has on them, and they see this activity only as an academic fulfillment. They prefer to do other kind of activities such as watching T.V, playing football or watching films, but not reading in their free time.

On the other hand, there exists the influence of schools and university contexts, that is, the academic context. With regards to this context, I can say that it influences the decision of a student to read a lot. The influence of teachers on students to read is very important and decisive for them. Depending on the kind of influence that the students receive from their teachers and classmates, they can acquire and feel different kinds of motivation and engagement to read. "Although motivation often is considered a personal characteristic of students, these researches emphasize that the kinds of

schools and classroom environments students encounter, can influence students' motivation greatly". (Guthrie and Wigfield, 1997, p. 28).

The project

Participants

I began the research with approximately sixty students from a public university in Tunja, but the number decreased for different personal reasons. These students were in their first and second semesters at the UPTC at the moment of developing the research, (that is, in the second semester of 2004) and attended four hours of English per week, over a two day period. The group consisted of male and female students between seventeen and twenty two years old and they were interested in improving their English level especially with regards to the reading skill. They were also highly motivated to become skillful readers, mainly because of the importance it has for their future expectations.

Data collection and analysis

At the beginning of the second semester of 2004, I explained the elements of my research study to my students, after which, they agreed to participate in the research by signing consent forms. During a period of one semester, data were collected from these students by means of journals they wrote at the end of each English class. In the following semester, (first semester of 2005) other data were collected through two semi-structured interviews in which ten students participated voluntarily. These interviews were recorded and transcribed and were also conducted in Spanish because in this way, the participants felt more confident to speak. Furthermore, the participants' real names were changed, in order to maintain their confidentiality.

The data analysis was done by carefully examining of the gathered information from

the students' journals and interviews. Through the constant reading of these data, some patterns emerged according to the research question, which helped me later, to construct the main category of this study.

Findings

In the following sections, data collected from the students journals and the recorded interviews, revealed that students agreed that teachers and classmates play an important role in the influence of reading activities. When students attend their different classes at the university, they are aware that reading improves their academic performance a lot at the university.

They also recognize that reading permits them to clarify doubts, to increase knowledge, to have different perspectives related to any specific topic and to broaden concepts about different topics which offer them the opportunity to share with others, for example their same teachers or classmates. Thus, they acquire awareness of the importance it has on their role as students.

On the other hand, the different opinions students have when they refer to the influence that teachers have on them is outstanding. They assert that if teachers motivate them a lot to read, if they influence them more to practice this activity not solely as an academic fulfillment, they would become aware of the great benefits they could obtain from it.

When I refer to engagement, it is focused on a very specific task acquired by oneself. That is, when students are aware that being engaged in reading is to be committed to themselves, they become the best that they can be. For example, if a person who has a low self esteem reads a book pertaining to this, it may help him to understand this issue better and cause a change.

Hence, this engagement is focused on them as persons. How it helps them to grow as persons,

how it helps them to be integral persons in order to become good professionals useful for the society.

In the next excerpts of students' journals, participants recognize the positive influence that the academic context have on them in the reading practice. These students are conscious of the reading practice because through it, they have the opportunity to clarify doubts and consequently, to read more each time. Moreover, these students are aware that the influence received through teachers and classmates, increase their curiosity and habit as readers, and in this way, they increase their desire to do this activity more each time, and enhance their commitment to reading.

"El contexto académico influye de una manera positiva ya que por un lado si a uno le inculcan el hábito de la lectura cada vez le va a gustar más y entre más lee uno mayores son las dudas que le quedan y crece el deseo por aclararlas". (SIC) (Journal Entry Nº 5, Jorge).

"Todo tipo de actividad académica y todo aquello que gira alrededor de mi actividad como estudiante amplía mi curiosidad en la práctica de la lectura". (SIC) (Journal Entry Nº 5, Yanet).

In relation to the engagement students have in reading, Guthrie and Wigfield, (1997) assert: "When individuals value reading and when they are interested in the subject they are reading about, engagement is enhanced" (p. 8).

In like manner, Gambrell (1996) refers to the relationship between motivation and engagement "The engaged reader is motivated, choosing to read for a variety of purposes, such as gaining new knowledge, escaping into the literacy world of the text, and learning how to perform a task. The engaged reader is knowledgeable, able to use information gained from previous experiences to construct new understandings from text; and to apply knowledge gained from text reading in a

variety of personal, intellectual and social contexts". (p. 16).

Conclusions

Below, there some of the findings that I obtained after doing the data analysis.

Firstly, students' perceptions are mainly centered on a great influence the teachers have on them. These students assert that teachers play an important role in the motivation they have towards reading. If teachers constantly reinforce and help students to become aware of the importance that reading has and not only view it as an academic fulfillment, they will see the importance it has for them as bings, to grow as integral persons. Hence, students will acquire a personal engagement to read by themselves, because they realize the great benefits they receive from it.

In addition, due to the influence that teachers have on the students during their classes, these students realize and recognize that reading is really a necessity for them. They also realize that once they find useful things for them as persons, their motivation towards reading enhances more each time and their engagement to practice it, also enhances. Then, they begin to love this activity by much, and it becomes a hobby, a pleasure for them, through which they can complement many useful things for their professional and personal life.

Furthermore, students conceive reading as an important activity that offers them many benefits as readers. Some students see themselves as poor readers because they need to engage more in reading, they need to spend more time developing their reading skills. However, they are aware that reading offers them many advantages, and it is useful for their personal enrichment.

Students, see themselves as good readers because they have a high motivation to read.

They like to do this activity because they are aware of the different benefits they receive from it, such as vocabulary enrichment that permits them to exchange ideas with others, to acquire general knowledge related to different aspects of their life and to acquire new experiences and to be informed about many advances in the world.

There are other students who perceive reading as an opportunity to be useful persons to the society, that is, they see reading as a way to transmit their knowledge to other persons who do not have the opportunity to read.

The perceptions that the participants have about the likes towards reading and also with the motivation for reading was noted. The students gave their personal perceptions about these issues, in relation to many factors that are involved in it.

Students do not feel any kind of motivation when teachers in their classes issued a specific reading they are not interested in. They only read such readings in order to fulfill a specific task, but in this case these readings do not contribute to their personal growth. They also argue that when teachers during their classes motivate the students to read using an appropriate methodology through which they have the opportunity to clarify doubts, understand the reading in a best way, they feel a great interest to read not only in the classroom, but also outside it and they feel that the reading tasks become a complement to materials used in their careers.

In addition, they have also changed their concept about reading and consider it, as an important part of their lives. In their free time, they read many things that are related to their personal likes and interests because they feel a necessity to do it, due to the fact that they find many interesting things that can complement their concepts in order to clarify doubts or increase their knowledge.

Finally, to conclude these findings, I can say that the motivation that the teacher exerts in his students, in relation to the text choices, is a

decisive factor for the students to feel interested in reading, or to see it only as an academic fulfillment.

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