

PROPAGATING CRITICAL READING AND CREATIVE WRITING LITERACY USING READER'S DIGEST MAGAZINES

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Abstract

Reading and writing have been seen as solitary, boring and individualized among ESL learners. Hence, teaching and learning critical reading and creative writing, can pose even a challenge to educators and learners of a second language, at all levels. The challenge is even greater in the digital era where students would rather spend time online on gadgets than flipping pages of magazines. As a receptive skill, reading a textbook outside the classroom would be next to impossible. This paper shares how second language educators can use an authentic material like Reader's Digest magazines to propagate fun, engaging and outdoor critical reading and creative writing activities. It incorporates various elements such as team building, collaborative learning and problem-based learning while engaging students to learn vocabulary, sentence construction and paragraph writing in an outdoor setting.

Keywords: authentic materials, critical thinking, creative writing, Reader's Digest magazines, ESL reading program

Introduction

Teaching and learning critical reading can be challenging to educators and learners of a second language at all levels. The challenge is even greater in the digital era where students would rather spend time online and on gadgets than flipping magazines to read (Hopper, 2005). Although those skills are fundamental in developing other language skills namely listening and speaking, there is an emphasis on students being good in reading in order to be successful in their academic pursuit. The heavy dependence on textbooks has stifled students' creativity and critical thinking, making reading and writing even more boring. Engaging students in reading a textbook outside the classroom or doing writing activities would be next to impossible as students prefer to do other activities than reading. However, despite being one of the most important skills, reading is still not welcomed by students. Pandian (2000) conducted a study on the reading habits among Malaysian students and posited that 80.1% of the respondents are "reluctant" readers. In another survey among UiTM diploma students, Wan Zumusni, Norhaiyati and Wan Aida (2005) found that only 50% of the students were willing to buy Reader's Digest magazines and only 32.4% were reported reading newspapers. In a study on Saudi EFL tertiary students, Al-Nafisah and Al-Shorman (2017) found that accessibility is one of the factors that hinder reading among university students.

This paper shares how Reader's Digest magazines are used outside ESL classrooms by arguing on the novelty, usefulness and how paper-based magazines can be used to teach reading outside the classrooms in an enjoyable manner to overcome the challenges in teaching reading.

Literature Review

A study by Wan Zumusni, Norhayati and Wan Aida (2005) revealed that students' performance in English language learning improved with the use of RD magazines and worksheets in the classrooms. The study was conducted in UiTM Kelantan, Malaysia and comprised of 86 students, who were poor language learners. The students were divided in two groups; 43 students in each control and experiential groups who used Reader's Digest magazines as supplementary materials in the classrooms for three months. Apart from an increased motivation and positive attitudes towards reading outside the classrooms, students in the experimental groups reported to have increased their scores in the reading exam from 2.3% in the pre-test to 14% in post-test for those who scored 41-45 marks.

Magazines can be a valuable source of authentic materials since they include pictures and graphics, and offer students a natural source of language use (Vavla, 2009). Reader's Digest magazines offer solutions to educators to organize outdoor reading activities which are flexible, adaptable, cost and time-saving. Students need to keep up with what is going around the world and having a current magazine that they can afford to buy would encourage reading beyond the classroom. Articles in newspapers and magazines offer current issues in various genres, making them as excellent choices as they are easily available and inexpensive for university students (Al Nafisah and Al-Shorman, 2011). Secondary school students' motivation for reading would be highly influenced by teachers than family as found by Ulper (2011) that students' loyalty towards their primary and secondary school teachers correlates positively to their motivation to read.

An enrichment program within an exam-oriented environment has a positive impact on lecturers' and teachers' motivation and behaviour and appeals to different learning styles (Hussin, Maarof and D'Cruz, 2000 and Pyle, 2010). Teachers have also shown positive attitudes towards the use of authentic materials in ESL and EFL classroom and this positively affects students' attitudes and motivation towards language learning (Polio, 2014, Lansford, 2014 & Akbari and Razavi, 2016). Using authentic materials motivate learners to communicate and prepare learners to real world communication (Lansford, 2014).

Kelly et al. (2002) and Polio (2014) offer effective ways for teachers to choose and use authentic materials with ESL/EFL students. This can be done by doing reading and writing activities outside the classroom involving teamwork and collaborative learning, in an outdoor setting. Outdoor learning has an influential and effective impact on students' academic performance on learning (Dhanapal, 2013) including students' enthusiasm on learning science. Therefore, organizing an outdoor activity using the

magazine can also increase the reading of the magazine beyond the classroom, by propagating the use of Reader's Digest magazines.

Research Method

UiTM Negeri Sembilan, Seremban campus, Malaysia has been adopting the Reader's Digest reading program as a supplementary material apart from the textbook. Reader's Digest magazines are chosen as a supplementary material for motivating reluctant readers to enjoy reading in a fun manner as some scholars suggest using authentic reading materials as a supplementary material to increase engagement beyond the four walls.

In a survey among UiTM diploma students, Wan Zumusni, Norhaiyati and Wan Aida (2005) found that only 50% students is willing to buy Reader's Digest magazines although 32.4% reported reading newspapers. Drawing from the results of the survey, an experimental research was done on diploma students to study the effectiveness of Reader's Digest magazines and its worksheets to help MUET (Malaysian University English Language Test) students. The positive result from the experimental research has led to adopting Reader's Digest magazines as supplementary materials in UiTM Kelantan and now UiTM Negeri Sembilan campus since 2003. The worksheets later are available in a digital form and can be accessed on <http://www.rdasia.com/magazine>.

In 2016 Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Negeri Sembilan, Seremban Campus and Reader's Digest Asia Pacific collaborated to organize "Critical Reading and Writing Workshop with Reader's Digest". The workshop on Reader's Digest which were attended by UiTM Degree students, secondary school students, teachers and district education officers in Negeri Sembilan. It was a good start to raise awareness on outdoor based education and using authentic materials in ESL classrooms – and beyond. The aim of the workshop was to share ways Reader's Digest can be incorporated into lessons inside and outside the classroom. This is towards fostering a love for reading and guiding students to practice reading independently outside the classroom. During the workshop, a questionnaire was distributed to the participants namely, the lecturers and students. Findings from this survey revealed that 98% of the participants have read Reader's Digest magazines; 59% was introduced at their respective schools or universities, 33.3% by family and 7.1% by friends. 55% of the teachers and district education officer believed that RD magazines would help their students to improve vocabulary and writing skills. However, alarmingly only 20% would use them as teaching materials in their classrooms. Perhaps, they are subjected to the prescribed textbooks and introducing a magazine would be burdensome for the lecturers.

Following this workshop, a module was designed to encourage reading the magazine beyond the classroom. The module was tested and refined at several secondary schools in Malaysia. The schools are located in rural and urban areas, including boarding schools. Students who participated in the "Critical and Creative Reading and Writing using Reader's Digest program" or CReW RD are in Form 1, 2, 4 and 6 ranging from 100 to more than 300 participants in each program.

After CReW RD Module is tested, the module is compiled in a book. The developmental research method (Richey & Klein, 2005) is used to in planning (framing the problem and identifying the participants and limitations of the innovative way of teaching beyond the classrooms), creating the module (using needs assessment in developing the outdoor critical reading and creative writing module) and designing a generic module that can be adapted according to different levels of students. Stoffelsma, & Spooren (2017) proposed using education research design in studying the issues, problems and possibilities in an intervention program in improving academic reading proficiency.

Discussion

When the students buy the Reader's Digest magazines, their motivation to reading beyond the classroom would improve as the ownership attainment enforces reading outside the classroom (Reading Evidence on Reading for Pleasure, 2012). Therefore, teachers can motivate students to read beyond the classrooms in a fun, engaging and motivating reading program to cultivate a reading culture at schools and higher education institutions to prepare students not only to do well in examinations but in their soft skills. Reading and writing are no longer viewed as solitary, boring and individualized activities among ESL learners. More importantly, acculturating reading for pleasure would help to combat social exclusion and raise educational standards (Department of Education, UK). Reading for pleasure offers resources that are unavailable in an education setting (Muchow, 2015). Heavy dependence on the reading textbook makes students struggle to understand the English language textbooks and they might find the textbooks irrelevant, uninteresting, and culturally unfamiliar (Nordin and Eng, 2017).

Conclusions

CReW RD addresses the challenges faced by educators in organizing activities that incorporates reading, writing, drawing and other soft skills such as leadership and collaborative learning. Materials and activities can be adapted according to the needs of their institution and the levels of the target group. CReW RD explores the use of Reader's Digest magazines outside the classrooms in an enjoyable manner. Building from an experiential research among UiTM students (Wan Zumusni, Norhaiyati and Wan Aida, 2005), CReW RD incorporates various elements such as team building, collaborative learning and problem-based learning while boosting their vocabulary, critical thinking and creative writing skills. Students work in a group to go from the first check point to the last check point. At each check point, they will do some tasks on critical reading and creative writing which will be judged at the end of the activity. The teams are judged not only on the completion of task but also on the teamwork, speed and creativity.

The Reader's Digest Reading Program using digital worksheets has been implemented since 2003 in UiTM but CReW RD is an extension of the classroom activity to take reading outside the classrooms. There are many critical reading and creative writing activities that can be done to allow students to learn vocabulary, sentence construction and paragraph writing. CReW RD demonstrates that learning can be

active and fun through reading and writing using authentic reading materials such as a magazine.

CRew RD promotes learning beyond classroom and enhances students' creativity, leadership skills, communication skills and soft skills while doing the activities. It caters to the total physical, mental and emotional response of learners towards language learning. Students learn critical academic reading as a subject in the classroom but having Reader's Digest magazines to be read outside the classroom and participate in the outdoor CRew RD allows them to learn more than critical academic reading. At the same time, it does not put additional burden to teachers if they know how to integrate RD magazines into their classroom as an alternative or another resource for medium to high ability students.

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