



UDC: 37.015.3:005.32:82

Motivated Students and Effective Learning in Literature Classes

Leila Tahmassebi

Lebanese French University

Received: 2016-04-10

Accepted: 2016-05-20

Published online: 2016-06-24

Abstract

Most of our students are reluctant readers who consider reading and learning as an obligatory action. This study is about how to change the students' view of education and study. The study is made of two parts. In the first section the childhood and school stage is discussed. In this part, I will talk about how to make our children life-long motivated readers who look at reading as a pleasant activity. In the second section, the college and university level is discussed. Here some beneficial classroom techniques are proposed to be used in the classrooms. These techniques enable the instructors to provide an effective learning atmosphere in the classroom to absorb the students in the process of learning as much as possible. What is more outstanding about these methods is how they increase the quality of learning by classroom activities which stimulate creative reading, thinking, and writing. But it is just the beginning of the story. There are plenty of fabulous articles and books that our respected teachers and instructors can study to build a creative intellectual classroom atmosphere.

Keywords: reluctant readers, reading habit, creativity, motivated readers

Statement of the Problem

To begin with, let's have a glance at an optimal classroom context of any teacher's. Before going to the class students have ideas and questions in their minds to be discussed in the class. Each piece of information triggers a new idea in their minds. They are self-confident enough to have ideas of their own in order to be written. They have not memorized some information to pass an exam; in contrast whatever they have learned is internalized and has become a part of their minds. They are hooked to their seats because they are participating wholeheartedly in the class discussions and activities. This ideal image is a touchstone.



In a traditional classroom atmosphere students just learn some information or take notes for later memorization. Whatever they learn is for the purpose of passing an exam not for the purpose of true learning. This possessive view of learning still dominates in almost all of our classrooms. In the schools and universities, we are encountered by a huge number of alleged struggling readers who are going to give up reading for good after the graduation. In our culture the absence of reading as a custom is concerning. Our individuals identify reading with a boring obligatory action. To have a closer view of the problem, let's consider an analogy.

Discussing about human's possessive way of looking at different aspects of life, Fromm (1997) , makes a comparison between three poets' appreciation of the beauty of a flower in their respective poems. Each poet in his successive poem admires the beauty of a flower in a different way. The first poem is by Alfred Lord Tennyson. In his poem, he appreciates the beauty of the flower by picking the flower up to have it for himself. The second poet, who is Basho, appreciates the beauty of the flower by just looking at the flower and enjoying the beauty of it. Goethe's way of admiring the beauty of the flower in his poem is different. He neither picks the flower up, nor leaves it in its own place just to look at it. He takes the flower with its roots and plants it again. In this way he doesn't take the life of the flower to own it but he has it as a whole living being (p. 35). Fromm applies this analogy to different aspects of life including political and educational aspects. Via this comparison, he questions the possessive view of life which is the root of many major problems of our societies.

Considering learning, Fromm (1997) goes on pointing to the traditional classroom atmosphere in which the students try to understand the lecture in a logical way and take notes for later memorization. He points out, "But the content does not become part of their own individual system of thought, enriching and widening it" (Fromm, 1997, p.24). The students superficially have the information either in their memories or in their notebooks and as a result they do not yield to any mental, personal or intellectual growth. Possessive view of learning makes reading an imposed and purposeless action in which student's reflection on the subject matter and true learning does not occur.



Hypothesis

This study is an exploration of the approaches which lead us in the direction of having motivated students and attaining an effective learning environment, generally in all kinds of classes and specifically in literature classes. That is what our educational system urges for and what this article reaches for.

Procedure

In this article it has been tried to introduce some effective and fundamental methods to help us have active and creative readers, thinkers and writers in classrooms. The first part of the article is about how to face the problem in the early childhood and school stages and in the second part some effective techniques and methods to be applied in classrooms are introduced. Since the focus of this article is on effective learning in literature as a subject, the examples are from literature classes. This fact does not mean that the techniques cannot be applied to other kinds of subjects.

Review of Literature

There are many genuine studies about motivation and effectiveness in teaching literature. Generally speaking there are two major categories about the topic: reader response view and stylistic view. The researchers following a reader response view point focus on student's accurate understanding of the texts in literature classes. On the other hand, some other researchers have a stylistic view of teaching literature. In this approach the focus is on the importance of either teaching literary devices or linguistic aspects of the text. This is an esthetic consideration of a text, in which the students come to an awareness of the artistic beauty of the work while they make a relation between the language and meaning at the same time. Since the focus of this research is more on how to involve students in a credible literary discussion, an eclectic approach, to say, a mixture of reader response approach and stylistic approach has been employed.



Early Childhood and School Stage

The role of parents in engaging their children in the process of active reading has long been proved. In fact, cultivating reading habits in children should start in early childhood. Parents should start reading books with their children as soon as possible. Even if their kids cannot read, they can describe the illustrations of the books or rebuild the story of the book cooperatively. Later on when their children are able to read and write, parents should read books for their kids and encourage their kids read to them too. They should stimulate their kids' imagination by asking them to predict the next event or foretell the end of the story. They can assist their children to brainstorm new ideas by asking them different questions and welcoming new questions of their children as well. Caring parents never underestimate their responsibilities and are determined.

Consistency is of crucial importance in this way. Parents should specify a definite time for this activity and try to do it every day. Constant reading practice makes reading a habitual action in the life of children and the child gets used to reading. In order to guarantee the consistency of reading activity parents can also make the reading session more pleasant by doing it in a green area or drinking coffee during the reading program. Parents can even get better results by performing the reading program in different forms.

Parents-children reading program can be performed in various ways. In her meta-analytic review, Sénéchal (2006) has identified three ways of parental involvement: parents reading to their children, children reading to their parents and parents teaching 'literary skills' to their children. The first two modes, parents reading to their children and children reading to their parents have already been discussed. What makes the reading projects more prosperous is teaching the kids how to read. She emphasizes that in her researches, "Having parents teach specific literacy skills to their children was two times more effective than having parents listen to their children read and six times more effective than encouraging parents to read to their children" (Sénéchal, 2006, P. i).



But the question is that, do all our parents know that the key for the success of their children is in their own hands? Do they have any special knowledge about how to accomplish their responsibilities about their children?

It is for the school and educational authorities to illuminate the parents on their responsibilities. Padak and Potenza-Radis (2010) advise the teachers to give instructions to the parents, "Help parents understand the critical role they can play in their children's reading development. Provide books, poems, and other authentic materials for use at home. Encourage parents to read to their children and to listen to their children read to them" (p. 2). In our schools we have different parent- school meeting sessions during the academic year. The educational staff including the supervisors should counsel the parents about their responsibilities. They might also arrange for several workshops to teach the parents some different out of school activities that they can do with their kids at home. The educational authorities should also broadcast different instructive programs through media to brighten the parents about their efficiency in the educational lives of their children.

Teacher's role is the final complementary part of this line. Our teachers should keep themselves updated about the new teaching methods and techniques in order to be used in classes. Padak and Potenza (2010) elaborate on the duty of teachers by pointing, "Our job is to engage students fully and completely, to move them away from passive mechanical responses towards thoughtful enthusiastic responses" (p. 2). For instance they can arrange for group reading activities. To make reading more pleasant they can hold reading sessions in different styles and different places like the library or the school green areas. They can encourage brainstorming ideas and production of new ideas on the part of the students and in this way they let the students feel self-confident enough to make ideas of their own. The route which leads our learners towards success starts with parents continues towards educational authorities and ends in teachers who are in direct contact with the students.



University and College Stage

In this section, the focus will be on university and college level. Though our youth are not trained in a way to be motivated learners but we cannot give up with them. After all, they make one generation of the society and they are of a significant class of the community. What should we do to have effective learning happen in this stage? Like the school teachers, our university instructors have the noteworthy responsibility of researching and studying in order to find and use creative intellectual activities. In the following paragraphs some methods are introduced to be used by the instructors to improve the students' impression of reading as a rigid and imposed one to an enjoyable purposeful one.

One method which is advocated by most of the educational researchers is group reading. Group reading is a method which engages all the students including the reluctant ones in the class activities. In this method the teacher divides the students of the class into groups. Each group is consisted of four to five students. Each session the teacher specifies fifteen minutes of the class time for group reading. Group reading can also take place in different places. It can be done in the green area of the university or in the library to promote library speculative reading as well. All the groups read the same text or each group reads a different text. The teacher-leader asks the students to take notes. For example in a poetry class the students take notes about the dominant devices of a poem and the significance of them. They can add their ideas and interpretation of the poem to their notes. Inasmuch as the students read, think and write their ideas down, this method is a very vigorous method to be employed in literature classes.

Learning begins by questioning. Good questions are the best stimulators of learning. Students usually like challenging questions because instinctually they like to express their competence. One exquisite method to be used in university classrooms is based on questioning. This method is called HEI or Hypothesis-Experience-Instruction method of teaching. This method was initially used by Kubayashi (1994) in science classes. Later on Knapp (2002) applied this method to teaching literature.



In this technique the instructor poses a question with several possible answers and the students are asked to answer the question. The questions are stimulators which involve the largest amount of student interaction and the least percentage of the centrality of teacher in the classroom. The group members discuss and share their ideas and finally they write a concluding report about the ultimate answer to the question. For example in a poetry class the teacher asks a question about the significance of a specific element in a special poem. Then he leaves the students make a relation between the form and content independently. The other groups make another relation between the same element and the poem. The teacher takes a distance as a monitor and lets the students interpret the poem's form and content by themselves. Finally the groups share and discuss their ideas. But the students should have enough basic knowledge about elements of poetry for instance, to be able to interpret a poem authentically and independently.

Having enough primary knowledge is a prerequisite for active participation of the students in the group discussions. Embarking on the opinion of Peacock (1990) Knapp (2015) asserts, "Students must be 'primed' before they begin whole-group or small-group in-class conversations" (para. 25). This means before the beginning of the group discussion the students are taught about the essential basic information, for instance elements of plot in short story or novel or sound based and meaning based devices in poetry. Knapp (2002) says "Priming may be done by a pre-discussion teacher-led conversation or by a handout ..." but he emphasizes that the instructors should prevent from "the application of such heuristics to the specific poem under investigation." (para. 25). This activity enables the students of literature interpret and discuss literature independently. It is the collaborative nature of group working activity which makes it suitable for teaching literature and it directs the students towards an in-depth speculation in order to produce and write the most brilliant ideas.

Another group activity which is especially practical to be used in teaching literature is establishing literary circles. Literature circles are groups of students in which the members read the same book but have different duties. The duties of the students are distributed in advance and before each group discussion, the groups are



told about the book or the poem they are going to discuss. Like the previous group activities, “the students are actively involved in the learning process using their collaborative discussions to construct new knowledge” (Whittingham, 2014, para. 3). If students are primed sufficiently the discussion will go on smoothly. At the end of each discussion session, literature circle sheets are distributed among the groups to be filled out by the members. For example our students have already learned about the elements of a plot in short story. They groups have already read an assigned short story and have discussed about it. In the final stage, a literature circle sheet with the parts related to rising action, climax, falling action and other elements of plot are distributed among the students. Each student fills out the form and in the section related to the students own interpretation, the students write down their own commentaries. The reports will be submitted later.

Conclusion

Motivated students have discovered the pleasure of reading. If our students understand the pleasure of reading the way they enjoy listening to a piece of popular music or watching a movie, reading becomes an integral part of their lives. In addition someone who reads for the pleasure of reading and feels the sense of satisfaction that comes after it is more likely read for learning. Focusing on the importance of reading for pleasure, Clark & Rumbold (2006) support a “Research from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD, 2002]” which “showed that reading enjoyment is more important for children’s educational success than their family’s socio-economic status” (p. 6). Furthermore they undergo significant personal and intellectual growth. Motivated students will benefit from a successful personal and educational life.

The methods and approaches of this article have been selected to have an effective classroom atmosphere with interested learners. Whatever the students learn becomes a part of their thoughts and the self-confidence they have gained during their educational experience lead them towards becoming creative readers, thinkers and writers.



There are plenty of other techniques and approaches which can assist parents and teachers to reach the most acceptable goal. The goal is changing the unmotivated learners to interested ones who are creators of their own ideas.

References

1. Clark, Ch. & Rumbold, K. (2006). *Reading for pleasure*. London: National Literacy Trust.
2. Fromm, E. (2008). *To have or to be?* New York: Continuum.
3. Knapp, J. V. (2002). Teaching poetry via HEI (Hypothesis- Experiment- Instruction). *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45(8), 718+.
4. Padak, n. & Potenza-Radis, Ch. (2010). Motivating struggling readers: Three keys to success. *New England Reading Association Journal*. 45 (2), 1+.
5. Sénéchal, M. (2006). *The effect of family literacy interventions on children's acquisition of reading from kindergarten to grade 3*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: RMC Research Corporation.
6. Whittingham, J. (2014). Reading motivation: A study of literature circles. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 18(2), 1-5. Retrieved May 30, 2016, from <http://www.rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/542114.pdf>.