

Reading in the classroom: how do Brazilian teachers of EAL¹ see it?

Leitura em sala de aula: como os professores brasileiros de inglês como língua adicional vêm isso?

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Resumo: *Diversas pesquisas sobre leitura em sala de aula de língua adicional baseiam-se na descrição dos processos cognitivos, na criação de novos materiais para a aprendizagem de uma língua adicional e/ou nos objetivos da mesma. Entretanto, essas pesquisas não abordam a visão que os professores de língua adicional, em especial os docentes brasileiros de língua inglesa, têm dos processos e de seu papel como ajudantes, norteadores do ato de ler. Buscamos, assim, através desta pesquisa, traçar um panorama da visão docente da importância da leitura e do importante papel que esta possui, numa tentativa de gerar uma auto-avaliação por parte dos mesmos, além de mostrar o que tem sido feito na prática, encorajando um maior estreitamento das ligações entre pesquisa acadêmica e sala de aula.*

Palavras-chave: *leitura, professores de inglês, aprendizado de língua inglesa.*

Abstract: *Several studies on reading in additional language classrooms are based on the description of cognitive processes, in the creation of new material for additional language learning and / or in its goals. However, these studies do not address the view that additional language teachers, especially Brazilian teachers of English, have of the processes and of their role as helpers, guiders of the act of reading. Therefore, through this research we aim to provide an overview of the teachers' vision of the importance of reading and its important role, in an attempt to generate a self-assessment by the teachers, besides showing what has been done in practice, encouraging a further strengthening of academic research and classroom.*

Key-words: *reading, English teachers, English learning.*

Introduction

When we think about learning an additional language, one of the skills teachers have to work with in order to help students to master the target language is reading. Although the act of reading is so complex that even the literature cannot create a definition that could be

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satisfactory, it is known that in terms of language classrooms, reading involves a text, the reader (student), the interaction between them and also the teacher.

In this article, we will not discuss the process of reading or the creation of different material to master this skill. Our aim is to show the results from a questionnaire responded by Brazilian teachers of EAL, since we believe their position is central and their beliefs shape their choices and attitudes, affecting their students' degree of success in understanding a text.

First, we will see the importance and effectiveness of reading in terms of culture and linguistic processes. Then, we will see the importance of reading in an additional language classroom. After that, we will present our research (research questions and results), discussion and final comments.

1. Reading

Language is what 'distinguishes man from beast' (Lefreve, 1964, p.188) and provides 'the basis for interaction and means of interaction for all subjects'. Our human activities depend on communication, otherwise that would be impossible for us to live in society. And what does reading have to do with all that? According to Lefreve (1964, p. 196),

reading is first and foremost a language process. Any language process may best be studied integrally with the signaling system or code that transmits meaning. It is one of the processes that 'may be analyzed and studied quite apart from the message sent and received'.

But do people still read? Why do people do so? What is the importance of it?

Many years ago, when *iPods*, television, computers and cell phones had not been created, people used to spend most of their times reading. Reading was seen as the main leisure activity among people from different ages. But the invention of other sources of entertainment did not make reading become an old-fashioned habit. People continue to read, even in a 'smaller scale'. It is part of our communication and a useful way to spread knowledge. Aebersold and Field (1997, p.6) state that 'reading is a powerful activity that confers knowledge, insight, and perspective on readers'.

From my experience as a Portuguese and English teacher, I have noticed reading is a great tool to improve vocabulary (through different texts, students have access to new words as well as to novel words in different contexts), style of writing and word power. Other researchers have found that reading is not only associated with new vocabulary (Anderson & Freebody, 1985), but also fluency (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004).

Reading is so important that it is highly recommended that parents inculcate the importance of it to their children in the early years. Aebersold and Field (1997, p.6) argue that:

‘families foster a variety of experiences that affect reading’ and ‘homes that are filled with magazines, newspapers, and books send a clear message to children about the value of reading.’ Reading allows parents to build a strong emotional bond between them and their children.

As noted above, the contributions of the act of reading are related to other linguistics aspects, such as writing, and also to social relations, such parents-children relationship.

In the next section, we will discuss reading in the language learning setting.

2. The role of reading in language learning

Mastering an additional language involves more than learning or acquiring aspects related to lexical, grammatical and phonological processes. Although language may be studied without a special attention to meaning, when learning a new language, students may be able to understand what the other speaker or the text says: the intended meaning.

Since English is nowadays considered a lingua franca, people from different ages and social backgrounds have been more willing to master the skills to communicate with speakers from all over the world. Therefore, teachers should provide their students with the learning of a linguistic code together with the opportunity to know other cultures and realities.

In this context, the development of the reading ability in an additional language increases the amount of knowledge and should receive, therefore, a special attention from teachers, the ones in charge of leading the classroom.

Related to it, there are two questions: Is reading teachable? If I’m a teacher but I do not have the habit of reading, is it possible that I can teach my students the importance of it?

According to McKool and Gespass (2009, p. 01), ‘if teachers serve as role models, then modeling or demonstrating their own reading preferences, passions and puzzlements most likely will affect how their students respond to reading.’ We could add that teachers’ attitudes and knowledge of reading will affect their student’s development of reading. The more a teacher knows about a certain subject, the better she/he can perform.

Nuttall (1996, p. 3) says that ‘if the only foreign language items you have read recently were directly concerned with your teaching, it may be that you, and your students too, do not really need to read that language except for classroom purposes’.

The authors, thus, suggest that the attitude a teacher has toward reading may influence not only in terms of becoming a role model to their students and sharing reading experiences with them, creating a setting that will enable students to become proficient readers, but also that reading is not teachable. As Krashen (1993, p.4) says,

when second language acquirers read for pleasure, they develop the competence to move from the beginning 'ordinary conversational' level to a level where they can use

the second language for more demanding purposes, such as the study of literature, business, and so on.

It is important to note that 'teachable' here is referred not in terms of method, model (bottom-up, top down theories, for instance), but in terms of habit.

In the next section, we will present our research.

3. Method

Our study has as its main objective to analyze and compare the answers given by Brazilian teachers of EAL related to reading. In the next subsections, we will present the characteristics of the research followed by the discussion.

3.1 Research questions

The research questions that guided this present paper are the following:

- 1) Does the academic formation affect teacher's performance, the way they see reading in the classroom as well as what they know about it?
- 2) Is there a significant difference between teachers who work in schools and those who work in free courses? Do they see reading from the same angle?
- 3) Does experience influence the way teachers select texts?
- 4) How do teachers see reading activities?
- 5) How do teachers see their role in reading activities?
- 6) How do teachers select texts?

3.2 Participants

Thirty EAL teachers from Porto Alegre, Brazil, were surveyed. They were divided in two groups, the free course group and the school group, according to the procedures already explained in the previous section. Each of them was asked to complete an online questionnaire.

The first set of questions required teachers to fill in with data about themselves, including years of experience, level of education and weekly workload.

The second set of questions included the importance of reading activities, the selection of texts, the kind of material used and so on (see appendix).

They were also asked to respond questions such as the reason why they think reading activities are important in the classroom context and a space for comments and or suggestions/questions.

3.3 Data analyses

The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The first one, the qualitative, was obtained automatically. The questionnaire was online, a spreadsheet created using the website *Google Docs*. The percentages and graphics were updated after participants finished answering and sent their responses.

The qualitative method was an analysis of the written responses, also collected by *Google Docs*, selected according to their relevance to our research.

The results, therefore, are divided according to the two sets of questions.

4.0 Results

In this section, we bring the quantitative and qualitative results.

4.1 Quantitative results

The first set of questions shows that:

1) The majority of the teachers has a degree in languages:

Are you undergraduated in languages?

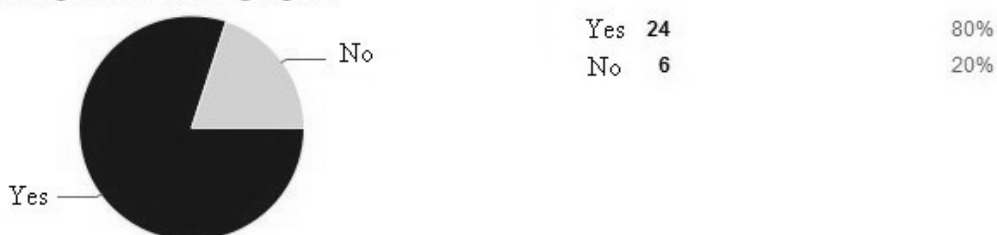
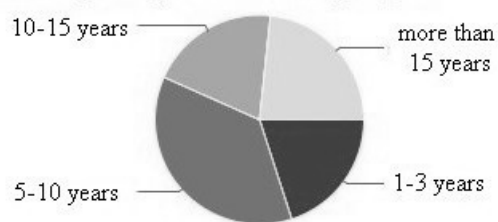


Figure 1. Percentage of teachers with a college degree

2) The majority of the teachers (80%) have been teaching English for more than 3 years:

How long have you been teaching English?

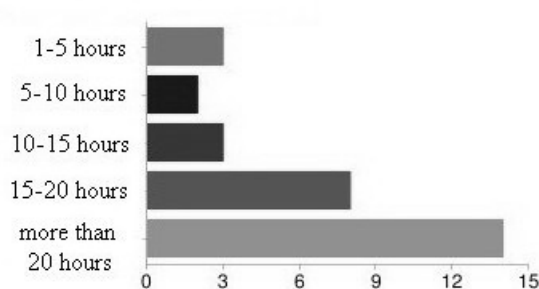


1-3 years	6	20%
5-10 years	11	37%
10-15 years	6	20%
more than 15 years	7	23%

Figure 2. Years of language teaching

3) More than 50% of the teachers work more than 15 hours per week:

What's your weekly workload?

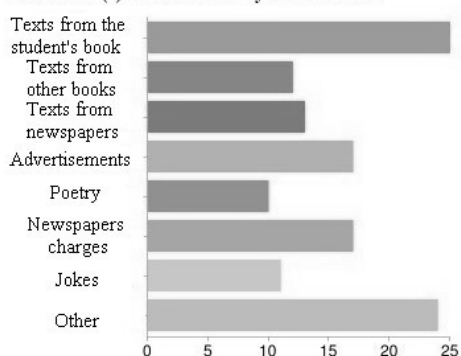


1-5 hours	3	10%
5-10 hours	2	7%
10-15 hours	3	10%
15-20 hours	8	27%
more than 20 hours	14	47%

Figure 3. Weekly workload

4) Teachers have been working with different kind of texts:

What kind(s) of material do you work with?



Texts from the student's book	25	83%
Texts from other books	12	40%
Texts from newspapers	13	43%
Advertisements	17	57%
Poetry	10	33%
Newspaper charges	17	57%
Jokes	11	37%
Other	24	80%

Figure 4. Types of texts used in class

4.2 Qualitative results

It was possible to observe that the majority of the teachers related the act of reading to linguistic aspects, such as vocabulary, comprehension, the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), grammar points *etc.* None of them sees reading as a non important activity and a

few of them related it to personal study and non-linguistic aspects, such as creating new ideas and opinions about a given subject.

The text encourages the readers to improve their vocabulary, strategies and the use of 'scanning' and 'skimming'. Reading also helps to see and learn as well as to observe how to organize ideas in a text.

(Response from Teacher B, translated by the author)

We could see that teachers try to bring authentic material to the classroom, and adapt them to their student's proficiency level, age and personal preferences. Those who work at schools have more freedom to work with texts other than the ones from student's books. The popularity of the internet is high and texts taken from blogs and *Twitter* are used along with newspapers and magazines:

I think (the book) is a high quality material, but I would like to have the possibility to use more original texts.

(Response from teacher D, related to the books used in a free course, translated by the author)

The material used is, in most cases, very grammatical, not open to interpretation and discussion. Students end up getting very attached to the textbook (and teacher as well).

(Comment from teacher G related to the book used in classroom, translated by the author)

Some of the teachers reported it is difficult to find texts that would fit the student's level, interest and the topic studied and some pointed out the lack of reading habits in their students and the advantages of those who read:

I see a great improvement in those who are actually committed to daily reading.

(Comment from teacher C related to reading, translated by the author)

5 Discussion

In this section, the findings are presented and debated. The discussion presented here is a simple analyzes of what may represent each of the facts presented in the research.

Taking back the research questions which oriented our article:

- 1) Does the academic formation affect teacher's performance, the way they see reading in the classroom as well as what they know about it?
- 2) Is there a significant difference between teachers who work in schools and those who work in free courses? Do they see reading from the same angle?
- 3) Does experience influence the way teachers select texts?
- 4) How do teachers see reading activities?
- 5) How do teachers see their role in reading activities?
- 6) How do teachers select texts?

Regarding the first research question, we could not see a connection between education level and knowledge. Most of them are aware of the importance of reading in the classroom and even those who are not undergraduated in languages try to get as much information as possible through reading or taking extra courses.

In question two, the main difference between the groups is related to the possibility of bringing different materials to the classroom. Reading is seen from the same angle by the two groups: as a tool to improve vocabulary, pronunciation and so on. It is interesting to note that this idea underpins Anderson & Freebody (1985) and Griffith & Rasinski (2004), who associate reading with new vocabulary and fluency, respectively. However, although aware of its importance, reading is not seen as an opportunity to know other peoples, different realities, and the act of reading is still not related to the power of conferring knowledge and ‘perspective on readers’ (Aebersold and Field, 1997).

Regarding to the third question, the criteria used to select texts seems to be the same, although those who have been teaching for just a few years seem to be more open to texts from different media, such as blogs.

Reading is seen, according to the answers given to question four, as a tool to facilitate language learning, but some of the teachers also see it as ‘part of the curriculum’.

In terms of teacher role and the selection of texts (questions five and six), teachers see themselves as helpers in the process of teaching a language -the majority of them think they are responsible for the success of a given activity as well- and texts are selected according to the linguistic level, the students’ interest in the topic and the connection with a given subject.

4. Final comments

There are many individual and cultural differences that influence the act of reading. Through this research it was possible to notice that teachers need to be aware of their role in their students’ lives, since they can also become an influence. When teachers are secure about their own knowledge, they can perform in their best way. Thus, they become the kind of teacher who is flexible to students’ needs, able to create plans focusing on the classroom objectives, helping them to become better students and to be proficient in English as well.

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Appendix

Research on reading in the EAL classroom

1) Are you undergraduated in languages?

Yes

No

If not, are you undergraduated in any other course?

Yes

No

If so, which one?

2) Which degree?

Teaching

Bachelor's Degree

3) Have you finished or are you taking a post-graduation course?

Yes

No

If so, mark the current situation and the certificate/degree:

Completed

Studying

Specialization

Master

Doctorate

Post -doctorate

4) Field: _____

5) Year obtained: _____

6) How long have you been teaching English?

1-3 years

5 -10 years

10-15 years

more than 15 years

7) What is your weekly workload?

1-5 hours

5-10 hours

10-15 hours

15-20 hours

more than 20 hours

8) Where do you work?

Public school

Private school

Free course

University

Self-employment

9) In your opinion, what is the degree of importance of reading activities in the EAL classroom?

I do not think it is important.

Important

Very important

Extremely important

Why?

10) Are you the responsible for the selection of texts used in classroom?

Yes

No

If not, who is?

If so, what are your criteria for that?

11) What kind (s) of material do you work with?

Texts from student's book.

Texts from other books.

Texts from newspapers

Advertisements

Poetry

Charges

Jokes

Other:

12) What is your degree of satisfaction with it?

Unsatisfied

Satisfied

Fully satisfied

Very satisfied

Extremely satisfied

Why?

13) What is your degree of satisfaction with the results?

Unsatisfied

Satisfied

Fully satisfied

Very satisfied

Extremely satisfied

Why?

14) What is your degree of satisfaction with your performance?

Unsatisfied

Satisfied

Fully satisfied

Very satisfied

Extremely satisfied

Why?

15) Final comments, questions or suggestions: