5 Independent reading together – combining self-directed and collaborative learning

Theresa Federici[1]

Abstract

This paper proposes a way of integrating self-directed reading into a collaborative classroom with formative and summative tasks as well as facilitating integration with the target culture, and familiarity with the target language in a variety of settings. Linking to literature on motivation, and drawing on case-study experience, an approach to introducing students to reading for pleasure in the target language will be suggested. The core element of the project is complete freedom of choice for students in the book they select, enabling students to match their personal reading tastes to their target language reading. Students benefit from the selection process and from discussion and comparison with peers on the selected texts. Students' awareness of forms of literature in the target language is enriched through the diversity of texts chosen within the cohort.

Keywords: literature, critical skills, learner-autonomy, motivation.

1.   Introduction

This paper describes a project that brought self-directed independent Target Language (TL) reading into a communicative language classroom. The project was integrated into a language module for second year (advanced) undergraduate students of Italian. However, it could be adapted for final year undergraduates

and for different languages. In this case, out of the three weekly contact hours, one hour was dedicated to independent reading. The reading element ran for one semester (ten hours); but would be well-suited to running across two semesters.

The purpose of the reading element was to equip students with the information and autonomy to select a book that appeals to their individual taste, and to share this with peers. No limitations were placed on book selection; students were free to choose from fiction or non-fiction. I intended to address two issues: (1) student engagement, and (2) integration and motivation. Firstly, when language modules include set-reading, student performance and engagement could considerably vary based on students' opinions of the book. I wanted to understand whether students' views were based on language comprehension or on content, and whether, if students were able to choose their own reading material, they would perceive the comprehension difficulties in the same way. Secondly, students were provided with the competences to choose their own reading material to facilitate their integration into the TL culture during their year abroad. Integrative motivation is a crucial component in L2 acquisition, as many studies have illustrated (Coleman, 1996; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002; Ushioda, 2001), and language courses are an ideal environment for students to further explore TL culture in a more personalised way.

This paper provides an overview of the considerations underpinning my materials design, and an outline of the structure of the reading project as I implemented it. It concludes with some findings from the perspective of the tutor and the learner.

2. Method

2.1. Materials design considerations

2.1.1. *Managing academic requirements*

As students have many academic pressures, reading for pleasure may not be a priority. Adopting a process-led approach (see White & Arndt, 1991) enabled

students to articulate their opinions alongside their independent reading. The act of reading became intrinsic and relevant to the class activities. Students were able to compare and contrast authors and writing strategies. Ambition and expectation need careful management: students were made aware of the time available and of the summative review-writing task. By integrating a reading element in a manageable way within the course and having regular formative and summative outcomes, I hoped to give students the space to explore TL literature.

2.1.2.   Managing student expectations

As individual choice was fundamental to the aims of greater TL autonomy and confidence, no boundaries were placed on genre. In an earlier version of this course I experimented with selecting the genre of detective fiction. I decided not to repeat this as students commented that having a set text would be as limiting as choosing a book from a genre they did not like. I thought I was providing a safer environment by limiting choice, but students' feedback differed – and was immensely valuable. In this revised approach, the only limitation was that students chose something they would read for pleasure. I nonetheless needed to support students and advise on the suitability of books (length, dialect) to avoid disappointment or demotivation. Choices included historical novels, fan-fiction, biographies, and teen-novels. Some chose two books, either rejecting their first choice, or because they wanted to read both. This process of discovery furthers the development of students' TL ideal-self identity (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013), and empowers students to see a place for themselves within the TL culture, to encounter like-minded groups: to find their TL 'niche'.

2.1.3.   Managing the group dynamic

Each student has different motivations, interests, and influences creating their TL identity. Freedom of choice in reading is aligned with Williams and Burden's (1997) social constructivist model of learner individuality and a dynamic learning environment in which tasks are interpreted "in ways that are meaningful and personal" (p. 43). It was hoped to create a meaningful and *personal* context,

that would lead to a number of *co-operative* tasks, in which individuality would lead to a collaborative and supportive group dynamic. Group dynamics can influence students' self-perceptions both positively and negatively (Ushioda, 2003), and group norms vary greatly depending on group composition. I was keen to see the effect of individual book choices on the dynamic, particularly in groups with wide-ranging language abilities. When students compete and compare, destructive norms may ensue, such as over-reliance on stronger students, or reticence in participating: such phenomena were diminished through individual book choices. There was genuine interest in peers' choices and views, thus fulfilling Hadfield's (1992) key elements of successful group processes, including support, co-operation, and empathy (mentioned in Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 195).

2.2. Structuring the reading element

2.2.1. Supporting learners in their choices

Students needed to be primed for the notion of choosing their own TL book to read for pleasure as this was an unknown experience for many students. Asking directly which books or authors students like can create a negative response, raised affective filters, and a lack of engagement. Using online quizzes from TL newspapers, social media, or magazines was a good entry into debate, as was talking about children's literature. TL book seller websites are also a good source of information as some include lists of best sellers or Top 10 by genre. Bringing a variety of TL novels the tutor owns to the class can also be very interesting; students enjoy the tactile experience of examining the covers and flipping through the pages. In fact, asking students to 'judge a book by its cover' is a stimulating activity that increases exposure to TL literature. Reviews and book 'blurbs' then followed, as students began to narrow down their options and make their choice of novel.

Students consolidate a range of autonomous skills in the TL. They are independently *navigating* and *reading* TL media and reviews with a clear and genuine purpose: to select their book of choice. These activities increase

student confidence in their own abilities and also facilitate exposure to the TL culture. Students reported that they had asked TL friends and acquaintances for recommendations, thus purposefully using TL for spoken and written communication. The 'academic' outcome of identifying and selecting a TL book is far exceeded by the *process* involved in arriving at a choice of book, in terms of TL exposure, confidence at engaging with TL environments, and language acquisition. This engagement with TL sources is a means to an end, a necessary step to choose a book, hence students do not focus on the quantity of TL exposure they gain. In comparison to courses with a set text, the process of selecting a book offers students significant opportunities for independent and purposeful interaction and engagement with the TL.

2.2.2. Scaffolding the reading process

The absence of a set-text demands a clear structure for classes in which students commented on their own reading process. These classes engaged with different writing techniques including narrative voice, creation of characters, use of language, and descriptive language. This facilitated comparative discussions amongst students on their own books. Communication became purposeful as students advocated for their chosen author. The process involved is again multi-faceted: awareness of TL discourse analysis is increased through collaborative discussions. Collaborative writing enabled students to work together on accuracy, lexical choices, and persuasive writing. Peer review was embedded into these activities with groups reading each other's written work. Students could have fun with these in-class activities, lowering affective filters (Krashen, 1981). The social dimension helps create purpose for writing, and the peer-reviewing increases awareness of readership, which in turn supports accurate communication.

A supportive and collaborative environment was enhanced by individual book choices: students' awareness of TL authors broadened as recommendations were made among students. Students were genuinely interested in each other's choices, and peer-engagement became an important vehicle for increased and continued reading for pleasure in the TL.

2.2.3. Creating assessment with a genuine purpose

From the outset, students knew their summative task would be loading their own book review onto an Italian website. This review became one of the standardised summative tasks for language modules, which was a short written task (+/- 300 words). Introducing authentic assessment, the 'publishing' of their review written in the TL on a website, enabled students to self-reflect. Just as they had read reviews to select their book, now they were completing this cycle by adding their own review to the same website, which may then influence others – even native speakers – when considering that book.

The authentic task enabled learners to consider a genuine readership, and to create the content of their review as a purposeful act of genuine communication. The review contained their personal perspectives, there were no right or wrong answers in terms of opinion; students could hate the book without fear of their summative mark being affected. In the written and verbal feedback, I commented on the persuasiveness of their review. Maintaining authenticity allowed me to assess purposeful communication through the rigours of the established marking criteria for the degree programme – as any summative task would be. Each assessment was unique, a snapshot of an individual's experience and perception of the book that they read.

3.   Results and discussion

3.1.   Student perspective

In the case study group most had only read TL books that were part of an educational programme (school/degree) and independently interacting with TL media was a new but empowering experience. Through weekly writing tasks I could assess language progression. Over the duration of the project, written work became more confident, accurate, and succinct, although causality of these improvements would be difficult to isolate. I could ascertain students' development in critical awareness through in-class activities based

on their opinions of their author. Peer-communication became purposeful as students became advocates for their choice of novel. Initially, some students were concerned about reading a complete book, however, they ultimately experienced a sense of achievement and pride in reading their 'own' book. Some did not manage to finish within the semester, however, they commented that completion of the book had become a personal challenge. Autonomy and freedom of choice empowered students to engage with their text beyond the classroom environment.

3.2.   Tutor perspective

Unlike reading a set-text with which students are (literally) on the same page, and are asked to progress at the same speed, the focus here significantly shifts from the tutor as leader, guiding the reading, to students being the 'authority' on their individual book, but with a clear structure of classroom activities to enable individual and collaborative learning. The tutor maintains responsibility for guiding acquisition of language skills – what changes is the subject-matter each student brings, not the associated language skills. This change in dynamic, with the tutor not having all the answers in terms of critical reading, leads to more genuine interaction patterns. In this case study, this dynamic added enthusiasm and increased participation, and interactions were found to be more spontaneous and engaged.

4.   Conclusions

The benefits of this approach were articulated by students in class-based activities. They were aware of their increased TL competences, particularly in acquisition of vocabulary, both from their own reading and from finding out about the texts chosen by others. The process-led dynamic and pedagogical framework enabled students to personalise learning and gain a sense of TL integration. This approach does not replace set-texts, but by interspersing set-text reading and free choice reading, students' competences, confidence, and cultural awareness can be enriched throughout their degree course.

References

Coleman, J. A. (1996). *Studying languages*. CILT.

Dörnyei, Z., & Csizér, K. (2002). Some dynamics of language attitudes and motivations. *Applied Linguistics, 23*(4), 421-462. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/23.4.421

Hadfield. J. (1992). *Classroom dynamic*s. Oxford University Press.

Hadfield, J., & Dörnyei, Z. (2013). *Motivating learning*. Routledge.

Krashen, S. D. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Pergamon Press.

Ushioda, E. (2001). Language learning at university: exploring the role of motivational thinking. In Z. Dörnyei & R. Schmidt (Eds), *Motivation and second language acquisition* (pp. 93-125). University of Hawaii.

Ushioda, E. (2003). Motivation as a socially mediated process. In D. Little, J. Ridley & E. Ushioda (Eds), *Learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom: teacher, learner, curriculum and assessment* (pp. 90-102). Authentik.

White, R., & Arndt, V. (1991). *Process writing*. Longman.

Williams, M., & Burden, R. L. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers: a social constructivist approach.* Cambridge University Press.

Innovative language teaching and learning at university: a look at new trends
Edited by Nelson Becerra, Rosalba Biasini, Hanna Magedera-Hofhansl, and Ana Reimão