

USING SHORT STORIES AS AN ATTEMPT AT DEVELOPING EXTENSIVE READING FOR ADVANCED UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Abstract: University students at an advanced or proficiency level of English can benefit greatly from exposure to a kind of instruction which not only offers more variety and deeper involvement in terms of reading and writing skills development but also taps into students' own creative and critical potential of interpreting an authentic text. I have tried to achieve this through a more extensive reading practice programme, which can be implemented with an eager class as part of regular general English university classes. I have created a lesson plan based on *The Black Cat* by Edgar Allan Poe, which was the starting point in my attempt to develop extensive reading.

Keywords: advanced students, extensive reading, creative writing, reading strategies, literature

JAK WYKORZYSTAĆ OPOWIADANIE W CELU WPROWADZENIA „EXTENSIVE READING” DLA STUDENTÓW UNIWERSYTECKICH NA POZIOMIE ZAAWANSOWANYM

Streszczenie: Studenci uniwersytetu na wysokim poziomie zaawansowania języka angielskiego mogą czerpać znaczne korzyści z takiej metody nauczania, która oferuje większą różnorodność i głębsze zaangażowanie w rozwój umiejętności czytania i pisania. Jest to metoda, która wykorzystuje własny kreatywny i krytyczny potencjał studentów w interpretowaniu autentycznego tekstu. Starłam się to osiągnąć dzięki bardziej rozbudowanemu programowi ćwiczeń z czytania, który można wdrożyć z chętną grupą w ramach regularnych ogólnych zajęć uniwersyteckich z języka angielskiego. Utworzyłam plan lekcji na podstawie opowiadania *The Black Cat* Edgara Allana Poe, co stało się początkiem mojej próby *extensive reading programme*.

Słowa kluczowe: studenci zaawansowani, czytanie, *extensive reading*, kreatywne pisanie, strategie czytania, literatura

1. Introduction

Having taught advanced students for a number of years I have observed that nothing brings more satisfaction, both to students and the teacher, than using authentic, unabridged texts in new and engaging ways. Bearing in mind that many advanced students may experience plateau at this point of their education, I have decided to go beyond a course book-based approach and encourage students to read more outside class. In the theoretical part of this article I present the rationale behind my attempt at extensive reading as part of a regular university English language course. I present an example of how to use authentic materials: a classic story by Edgar Allan Poe entitled *The Black Cat*. In the practical part, I offer a lesson plan which students and teachers can hopefully find interesting and useful.

2. Reading and advanced students

Students who are at C1 or C2 level have been exposed to years and years of English language instruction. They have developed their own learning strategies, habits and methods that have resulted in their high level of English. As for the skill of reading, I daresay these students have been exposed mostly to intensive rather than extensive types of reading practice. The vast majority of them have approached a course book text (usually not very long) with a very practical aim of using it as a tool for learning and practicing grammar, expanding their vocabulary or analysing the format of the text. In class, guided by their teacher, they have read many such texts with particular attention to language. Their comprehension of the text has been checked by an array of techniques. Undoubtedly, these methods are invaluable for furthering student progress. They have enhanced their skills and made them into what they are today: advanced learners.

However, not only does this kind of reading practice make use of only a small selection of reading strategies such as scanning, skimming or guessing meanings from the context but it also routinely exposes students to a similar kind of short, often factual, adapted texts that can be typically found in any given course book. Students at this level may exhibit fatigue with the same formats of texts as well as topics covered in a typical course book. Bearing in mind that overexposure to the same methods, topics or types of texts may result in students experiencing a plateau, it would be worthwhile to introduce advanced students to a richer reading experience. Advanced students deserve a wider and more stimulating choice of authentic literary texts as well as more challenging teaching methods. Some examples of these, less often used, reading strategies are: reading carefully in key places, identifying important information, separating facts from opinions, predicting the content of the text and trying to fill in the gaps through inferences, attempting to integrate ideas from different parts of the text or building-in interpretations of the text while reading (Grabe, 2009).

Furthermore, intensive reading practice does not typically encourage the reader to become engaged with the text on any deeper level. Louise M. Rosenblatt in her *Literature as Exploration* distinguishes between two reading stances: efferent and aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1995). What I have sketched in the paragraphs above falls into the efferent category, whereby the reader is focused on “carrying away specific information to satisfy an external demand or need” (1995: 269). Using the information from the text the reader/student is required to fulfill a specific task, e.g., answer a comprehension question or fill an information gap in a sentence.

The aesthetic approach goes beyond the mere comprehension of the text, which is no longer a difficult task for advanced students. Instead, they become engaged in the ideas, opinions and reflections of the author. A given story may offer an emotional outlet. As Louise M. Rosenblatt points out: “Literature provides a *living through*, not simply *knowledge about* [...]” (1995: 38). Students attempt to interpret the text from their own unique and personal perspective bringing the text alive through their own emotions and reactions. They are encouraged, or even challenged, to build-in their own readings. This deeper involvement in the literary world provides for a richer reading experience (1995: 33–35).

What it also allows for is practice across other language (and academic) skills, essential for university students, like speaking critically, writing a summary or debating a point. There is almost no limit to what we, as language teachers, can offer our students here. A given novel or story becomes a springboard for developing many different skills, e.g., expressing one’s point of view in a debate, commenting positively negatively (or negatively) on another person’s interpretation, delivering a persuasive talk etc.

3. An attempt at extensive reading

It is not surprising then that bearing the aesthetic approach in mind I have attempted to introduce my advanced students to a programme of extensive reading. There are some widely known principles to bear in mind before approaching the task. The most important of them are: reading materials should be relatively undemanding; reading speed is faster rather than slower; learners choose what they want to read; learners try to read as much as possible on a regular basis; reading is its own reward (learners do not expect a test or exam); the teacher orients and guides learners (Bamford, 2008).

I have adapted the principles from above so they fit the reality of regular language classes offered to university students.

1. At least at the beginning, the reading material should be relatively easy and not too long so students can slowly develop a habit of reading for pleasure. It would probably be best to select a short story (e.g., Alice Munro’s *Free Radicals*) or a relatively short novel (e.g., Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None* or Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles*).

2. Students themselves choose what they want to read, which in reality means reaching some kind of consensus within a whole group before deciding on a particular item.
3. Students are offered a reading list which they are encouraged to modify according to their own preferences and reading tastes.
4. I aim for regularity, which means a different item from our list is selected for reading every two or three weeks or so (quite possibly, this can only be achieved if students have their English classes scheduled for twice, rather than once a week meetings).
5. There is no punishment for not having read or finishing a particular story or book.
6. Students are invited to share freely and extensively their own reactions and opinions and to engage with the story on a more creative level, e.g., by writing their own version of a particular paragraph or an ending.

At this point I would like to share what we managed to read with one of my C1 groups at the Institute of Middle and Far East, The Jagiellonian University, from October 2018 to March 2019 (second year students with classes scheduled twice a week). These were the books and stories we “did”: *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami, *An Outpost of Progress* by Joseph Conrad, *The Landlady* by Roald Dahl, *The Way Up To Heaven* by Roald Dahl, *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie, *The Black Cat* by E.A. Poe, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Border Family Murders* by Angela Carter.

I have outlined my attempt at an extensive reading programme which is feasible in the reality of regular university ELT classes. I believe engaging students with an authentic, unabridged text in an unthreatening and friendly manner brings a lot of satisfaction, both to students and the teacher, and ultimately advances a variety of foreign language skills. One way of starting a programme like this may be offering students the lesson plan I have devised on the basis of E.A. Poe’s *The Black Cat*, which affords students to discuss and share their reactions to what they have read.

4. Why Edgar Allan Poe?

Most students will have heard about, or even read, “the father of the detective story” and he remains an attractive writer to this day thanks to the dark genius of his gothic horror stories and his fascinating, troubled life. Being an absolute classic, still re-read and re-made, *The Black Cat* offers students a little more of a challenge, mostly because of the language. Therefore, students are asked to read the story outside class in their own time. Additionally, in the lesson plan that I have created there is, amongst other things, some focus on vocabulary accompanied by two short, visually attractive films I have found on the TED-Ed platform to acquaint students with the writer and his life as well as his literary output and significance.

5. Conclusion

Inviting students to read and then respond, in their own personal and creative way, to an engaging short story may be the start of an exciting adventure which is called extensive reading. Advanced students can definitely benefit from a programme like this, or a form of it, provided they can respond freely and engage with the story on a deeper level which goes beyond mere comprehension checking practice. I believe an attempt like that is worth making as it has the additional benefit of shielding our students from plateauing.

Bibliography

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THE BLACK CAT BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

PART ONE

Watch the short film about E.A. Poe and note down three interesting facts about him. Compare and discuss in pairs.

(<http://ed.ted.com/featured/kpxLn1Hp> as of [accessed: 20 May 2016])

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PART TWO

Put the extracts in the correct order in which the story unfolds. Complete each gap with one word.

A

On the night of the day on which this cruel deed (1) done, I was aroused from sleep by the cry of fire. The curtains of my bed were in flames. The whole house was blazing. It was (2) great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself, made our escape from the conflagration. The destruction was complete. My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned (3) thenceforward to despair.

B

Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, during (4) my general temperament and character – through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance – had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence. My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my

disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them. For Pluto, (5)
I still retained sufficient regard to restrain me from maltreating him [...].

C

The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a freeman. The monster, in terror, had fled the premises forever! I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little. Some few inquiries had been (6) , but these had been readily answered. Even a search had been instituted – but of course nothing was to be discovered. I looked upon my future felicity (7) secured.

D

I continued my caresses, and, when I prepared to go home, the animal evinced a disposition to accompany me. I permitted it to do so; occasionally stooping and patting it as I proceeded. When it reached the house it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favorite with my wife.

E

“Gentlemen,” I said at last, as the party ascended the steps, “I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health, and a little more courtesy. By the bye, gentlemen, this – this is a very well-constructed house.” [In the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew (8) I uttered at all.] – “I may say an excellently well-constructed house. These walls—are you going, gentlemen? – these walls (9) solidly put together;” and here, through the mere frenzy of bravado, I rapped heavily, with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brick-work behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom.

F

I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not uncongenial with my own. Observing my partiality for domestic pets, she (10) no opportunity of procuring those of the most agreeable kind. We had birds, goldfish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and a cat.

(Source: E.A. Poe, *The Tell-Tale Heart and Other Stories*. Amazon Classics. Kindle Edition)

PART THREE

DISCUSSION AND VOCABULARY

1. What are the consecutive stages of the narrator’s deterioration? Discuss in pairs.
2. What are the conflicts in *The Black Cat*? What types of conflict (physical, moral or emotional) do you see in this story?
3. What are the elements of the Gothic that you can find in the story? Make a list and compare with a classmate.

4. What are some of the themes in *The Black Cat*? Cross out the irrelevant ones: evil, love, death, rebirth, terror, hate, sadness, prejudice, premonition, strength of character, crime, punishment, deception, folly, felicity. Can you add any other themes?
5. What do you think of the story? Would you recommend it to anyone?
6. Look at some words from the story. Who or what do they refer to?

conspicuous sagacious to maltreat wrath to jeopardize atrocity
 feeble carcass hatred aversion the gallows a trait to anticipate
 to loathe the premises to descend a fiend intoxicated

7. Give antonyms to the following words:

sagacious – conspicuous –
 intoxicated – feeble –
 hatred – to loathe –
 hideous – to descend –
 aversion – to jeopardize –

PART FOUR

Watch a short animated talk about Poe's literary achievements.

(<https://ed.ted.com/lessons/why-should-you-read-edgar-allan-poe-scott-peeple> [accessed: 12 Sept. 2016])

BEFORE WATCHING

Match the words to their definitions. Next check with your teacher.

1. propensity a) competent in many areas
2. purloin b) extreme paleness
3. pallor c) a natural tendency
4. versatile d) occurring after one's death
5. posthumous e) to steal

AFTER WATCHING

Answer the questions.

1. What was special about Poe's work, especially when compared to other horror writers of his time?

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2. What two rules guarantee, in Poe's opinion, the high quality of a short story?

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3. What are some of Poe's inventions in fiction?

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4. What do his stories really explore?

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5. What other genres did he create in?

.....

TEACHER'S NOTES

The whole lesson usually takes about 90 minutes.

PART ONE

Students' answers and what they have managed to write down.

PART TWO

The order of the extracts: 1. F, 2. B, 3. A, 4. D, 5. C, 6. E

The gaps: 1. was, 2. with, 3. myself, 4. which, 5. however, 6. made, 7. as, 8. what, 9. are, 10. lost

PART THREE

Ex. 6

Suggested antonyms:

sagacious – dumb, stupid, ignorant

intoxicated – sober

hatred – love, kindness

hideous – beautiful, pretty, attractive

aversion – liking, love, desire

conspicuous – invisible, hidden, concealed

feeble – strong, healthy, robust

to loathe – to love, to cherish

to descend – to ascend, to go up

to jeopardize – to protect, to secure

PART FOUR

BEFORE WATCHING

1.c, 2.e, 3.b, 4.a, 5.d

AFTER WATCHING

1. His attention to form and style.
2. It must be short enough to read in one sitting and every word is important, which contributes to “an intense and singular experience” called “the unity of effect.”
3. The use of an unreliable narrator, a detective story with its armchair detective.
4. Paradoxes and mysteries of love, grief and guilt and human ability to self-destruct.
5. Apart from short stories he wrote critical reviews, literary analyses, satires, poetry, a treatise on astrophysics, an adventure novel.