

## A Proposal to Develop Reading Habits among First-Year EFL University Students in Algeria

Ali Baiche

Department of English, University of Tlemcen,  
ALGERIA.

[baiche46@yahoo.fr](mailto:baiche46@yahoo.fr)

### ABSTRACT

*In this paper we tried to suggest the incorporation of a module designed to include diverse selected contents in link with all the subject matters in the English curriculum. The assumption behind this proposal was to develop reading habits in the students who arrived at departments of English with various weaknesses and difficulties in reading and understanding English. The aim of this suggestion was then to initiate and involve students in different types of discourse to provide them with sufficient knowledge, vocabulary, ideas and views to improve their standards in English. It was also intended to facilitate their learning and participation in debates and discussions that would come throughout their studies and in real life situations.*

**Keywords:** reading module, reading development habits, better English standards

### INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a “suggested module” that is specially designed to include a program of selected contents that incorporate diverse and graded readings in accordance with English studies. It is a means to increase first year students’ proficiency in understanding discourse, writing, and speaking English appropriately. This academic module is concerned with preparing ‘freshers’ to cope with linguistic, literary, and cultural studies throughout graduate and post-graduate studies. The reasons for such a choice are that students at this level have various weaknesses in understanding English and show no interest in reading. The aim is then, to train and involve students in different types of discourse to develop reading habits. In sum, it is not an exaggeration to claim that such an enterprise could be very helpful for students in all other subjects, and also when undertaking any research.

In terms of methodology, the suggested module we have in mind consist of six parts:

*why reading, appropriate reading materials, reading for knowledge and understanding, reading aloud, reading to develop speaking, and reading to develop writing.*

### WHY READING

Due to the lack of reading in English, our EFL students encounter a number of problems in their first year at the university level, and find themselves in need to catch up a great deal to say the least in terms of understanding what is presented to them and taking part in class debates. Though they studied English for seven years in secondary education, students’ major problems are linked to limited vocabulary, awkward grammar and expressing themselves. This is why an approach based on reading to develop understanding various types of discourse as well as speaking and writing is highly recommended for first-year EFL students in our universities.

Reading here is a requirement where students read intensively and extensively. With intensive reading students will develop greater control of the language that is specific to each

text by reading several times the same material. Special attention is put on the linguistic and semantic details, i.e., on grammar, discourse markers, vocabulary, etc. Extensive reading on the other hand is programmed at a later stage where students are presented longer authentic materials to increase their individual reading rate. Students' contributions in the choice of reading materials is encouraged and followed by reports that are presented to the whole group in a 'reading forum' where variety brings more exposure to language and knowledge.

### **APPROPRIATE READING MATERIALS**

One of the basic things for the success of this approach relies on the choice of appropriate reading materials. What is actually meant by appropriate is that the selected reading texts, articles, books, etc. should be at the level of the target students. In fact, linguistically difficult texts do not encourage students to read and may even develop frustration, demotivation, and consequently lead them to avoid reading altogether. In this context, an observation is made by Reading Rockets (2001) where it is explained that fluency develops with texts that are relatively easy for students to read and classified under 'independent level', and then moves towards 'instructional level' and 'frustration level' as interpreted in table 1 below:

**Table 1. Reading levels of fluency**

---

Independent Level	Relatively easy for the students to read
Instructional Level	Challenging but manageable for the readers
Frustration Level	Difficult texts for the students to read

---

Source: (Adapted from Reading Rockets, 2001)

Therefore, in order to develop students' motivation and interest, it is essential for the contents, and particularly the first reading materials to be within students' reach. If the topics are introduced in a way that students understand without a heavy dependence on the teacher's help things will move on naturally, otherwise a feeling of frustration and inability is developed from the beginning and may unfortunately lead to neglect and disinterest.

### **READING FOR KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING**

Knowledge is a well-known fact that leads to human progress, and this knowledge is generally obtained from various sources. In fact, knowledge is preserved in books and nowadays in more sophisticated forms (websites and multimedia) of storage that provide instant information and fresh insights. However, the key to this knowledge is and will probably remain forever through reading. No matter whether one reads in his native language or in foreign language, it is reading that helps students to gain knowledge and understand different sorts of things that are encountered daily. Though in EFL settings it may not be knowledge (i.e., in search of knowledge as such) that directly interests the student, reading still basically remains one of the most indicated way to improve language skills which are part of the students' academic competencies. The latter make significant difference either in classrooms, during exams, or in real life situations between students who possess these skills and those who do not.

Reading is also considered the source of hints and cues that foreign language learners turn to in order to find ways how to express themselves in spoken and written forms. After the teacher, the classroom tasks and activities, and other sources of knowledge such as websites and electronic media devices, reading remains the most practical way that helps students to develop their language proficiency. In addition, reading is known to be one of the most

attractive ways to raise students’ interest and motivation in foreign language learning. For this purpose, the selection of reading materials should be done according to what students of this level would expect. In fact, imposing adults’ selections are often rejected because young people generally want to know about their time and the ways the youth sees the world.

## READING ALOUD

Reading aloud is an old practice that has been abandoned for decades now. However, “*Research has shown that reading aloud is the best way to prepare children for learning to read and to keep them reading as they learn and grow*”. (Cormier, 2008: 1). Indeed, children who practise reading aloud are always ready to read in imitation of the teacher’s reading or whenever the teacher asks for a volunteer. This has also an influence on the ability to speak. What encourages learners to speak is first of all what to say and in some way this comes from reading aloud.

Unfortunately the time allotted nowadays to reading in EFL in our state schools is insignificant and even not practised at all in many classes. Teachers tend to think that reading aloud is only a waste of time and that learners can be occupied otherwise with more intellectual skills.

On the contrary, practice has shown that usually after silent reading in order to understand the content, reading aloud is not only an effective process to improve reading skills in general but also a device to develop speaking skills. For instance, many orators, lecturers, students, etc., find themselves in need of reading aloud for communication purposes while addressing and speaking to others. In this context, Brumfit (1980: 4) explains the necessity of “The mechanical skills” in the reading processes as in table 2 below:

**Table 2. Reading processes: the mechanical skills**

<i>Ability to</i>	<i>Ability to</i>	<i>Ability to</i>	<i>Ability to</i>
derive concepts from printed or written symbols	<u>read fast</u>	<u>vary speed</u> in accordance with reading aims and needs	<u>read aloud</u> so as to achieve meaningful communication with one’s listeners

Source: (Adapted from Brumfit, 1980: 4)

**N.B:** Underlining in the text renders my own emphasis

In fact, the abilities mentioned in the table above are what our students need to develop from deriving concepts to reading fast and reading aloud to achieve full understanding of written materials and communicating with others.

## READING TO DEVELOP SPEAKING

As the title of this section implies, in reading sessions some time is reserved to oral abilities where students are urged to use the language. In fact, speaking and taking part in class debates and conversations can be easily initiated with students who have been prepared for this purpose through selected readings. Unfortunately, oral skills have often been neglected all throughout the adopted ELT methodologies in secondary education and students are not well prepared for the university. The situation is so because in Algeria there are no oral exams in the Baccalaureate and neither teachers nor students really bother about the spoken form of the target language.

In this module, students can practise speaking by way of various procedures. First, reading constitutes a real input to generate ideas and views about what students are exposed to. For

instance, the use of portfolios here is helpful in the sense that while there is a class discussion on a familiar topic, students are more likely to participate because they are supposed to have some necessary information stored in their documentation portfolios. Indeed, quite often teachers repeat that students cannot generate any discussion without having something under their eyes, but with some ideas at their disposal they are more daring and learn how to take part in speaking activities. A further argument in favour of learning to work with portfolios is the fact that students become unconsciously aware of the importance of preparation for this phase of speaking. In other words, students' intrinsic motivation develops and their active involvement in the selection and collection of information is a step towards learning autonomy at various levels. There are also some techniques that help in the development of speaking as explained in the subsequent section.

## READING TO DEVELOP WRITING

The question whether or not reading contributes to 'writing' does not have to be demonstrated anymore. But writing as an academic activity, remains one of the most difficult tasks for foreign language students to master. It is, in fact, a requiring difficult activity for all those who are concerned with academic writing from a little composition to a research article or a book. However, there are methods that help students to write. For those who start reading early in their infancy, they generally have no difficulties when it comes to 'writing skills' and can manage the activity be it in their native language or in a foreign language. Others, as it is often recommended by teachers will have to "read in order to write".

This quite often repeated cliché is to some extent right for the simple reason that while reading students become familiar with language mechanisms. It is, however, not easy to make the students read, but it is not impossible either if due care is taken by the teacher's provision of selected reading materials that offer opportunities to practise writing. In this context, and for writing purposes, Ourghi ( 2001-2002 : 242 ) explains that " *By choosing a topic that involves the students the teacher is providing a context within which effective learning on the target writing aspect can be undertaken*". Students, indeed, identify more with the topics of their interest in the sense that they can *speak and write* about the things they are familiar with or want to know about. Once more, if students are initiated right from start to use a portfolio where they keep information about their readings for writing purposes, writing activities will not be particularly difficult. This procedure will later lead students to gradually write on free topics quite autonomously.

Besides, with computers, networks and multimedia being everywhere nowadays, many students by curiosity or interest use these tools as an extension of classroom activities to read on the subject of their concern for writing purposes. Though perhaps this practice is not generalised, but when students compare their outputs and see the difference at the level of teacher evaluation of their works, they feel the obligation to follow the same procedure of successful students. In the end, one may say that with appropriate resources and teachers' guidance, students can be led to read in order to understand, speak and write with ease in all their subjects during their English studies.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we have tried to show that 'reading in order to understand, speak and write in a module within the first-year English syllabus is an opportunity for students to develop "3 in 1". Therefore, efforts to increase students' competence in understanding, speaking and writing depend on the creation of a classroom atmosphere that fosters appropriate readings and learning situations. In order to compensate somehow for the lack of an 'English environment' for EFL students in this country, the provision of selected appropriate reading

materials by ELT specialists is necessary to have an attractive effect on students and raise their motivation. There is also a need for learning materials that exhibit both local and world cultures in some comprehensible authentic language in order to attract students and make them inquisitive about their selected readings. Once more, the purpose is to get students interested in their reading materials, and be happy to make ‘new acquaintances’ with various contents. If we can get students to this point, then there is hope for change to take place and for our students to improve their standards in English throughout their studies in English departments and sections in Algerian universities.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Baiche, A. (2010). *Innovation and Change in Language Education: A Critical Reflection on the Teaching and Learning of EFL in Secondary Education in Algeria*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis in Applied Linguistics and TEFL. University of Oran 2010.
- [2] Brumfit, C. J. (1980). *Problems and Principles in English Teaching*. Oxford: Pergamon Press Limited.
- [3] Cormier, E. K. (2008). “*Reading is Fundamental*”. McNeese State University. Retrieved January 10, 2009, from <http://www.mcneese.edu/news/news/literacy3.asp>
- [4] Ourghi, R. (2001-2002). *The Implications of Critical Reflection and Discourse Awareness for Educational Change: The case of the writing Curriculum, Learner, and Teacher Development at The University Level*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. Department of Foreign Languages. University of Tlemcen.
- [5] Reading Rockets (2001). <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/341>