

Promoting literacy through reading programmes for first-year university students

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University lecturers share a concern for incoming varsity students who lack the literacy competence to succeed in their courses. Given the strong correlation between reading and literacy, the English Department commenced an innovative and effective reading programme which witnessed positive and enthusiastic results. By engaging students in reading select works of fiction, we were able to increase their comprehension, build their vocabulary and inculcate an individual interest in reading literature. This paper discusses the resultant voluntary reading programme that was organised for first-year students enrolled in English language classes, the theoretical methodology of the programme, its implementation and positive results, especially in the students' improved English course marks. It also explores ways to configure this programme to extend beyond university boundaries into effective community engagement.

Introduction

Literacy is a paramount concern for academics teaching in higher education. Although South Africa may boast a youth literacy rate of 98.8% (Literacy Rate – Youth Total in *Trading Economics* 2015) with women being slightly higher at 99.27% than men at 98.50% (South Africa Literacy Rate 2015), this rate may only reflect those individuals with the ability to read and write in simple sentences for everyday comprehension, as the strict definition of literacy implies. Kelly Long, literacy programme coordinator for GADRA Education, counters that 'to truly be literate one must be able not only to decipher the symbols which make up words but also to interpret text or read for meaning' (Pretorius 2013).

Research has shown a clear correlation between literacy and reading. Carole Bloch, Director of Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA), asserts the importance of reading in developing literacy skills:

Storytelling and reading expose children to a special form of language that is holistic, rich and complex. This allows them to tune into the rhythms and structures of language and broadens their conceptual worlds and their vocabulary to express themselves. (2012:11)

Additionally, studies have long supported the connection between reading and academic performance (Aitchison & Harley 2006; Caskey 2008; Falk-Ross 2002; Livingston *et al.* 2015; Nel, Dreyer & Kopper 2004; Pretorius 2002). Nel *et al.* (2004:95) argue unequivocally that 'Reading is the skill upon which success in every academic area is based'. Bharuthram (2012:205) supports this statement by adding that: 'poor reading skills lead to poor academic performance which in turn adversely affects student's overall development'.

Reports from the National Benchmark Tests confirm that students entering university lack proficiency in reading and writing. This may be understandable as 2014 witnessed an increased failure rate for students writing home language and English papers for matriculation (Saba 2015) with Eastern Cape students scoring the lowest with only 64.5% passing matric (IOL News 2015).

Therefore, many students may be entering university underprepared for the reading and writing levels at which they are expected to perform. In a study examining the relationship between reading ability and academic performance amongst undergraduate students at the University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretorius (2000) found that urgent attention needs to be given to improving the reading ability of students at tertiary level, for 'reading constitutes the very process whereby learning occurs'. Pretorius explains that:

reading is important in the learning context not only because it affords readers independent access to information in an increasingly information-driven society, but more importantly because it is a powerful learning tool, a means of constructing meaning and acquiring new knowledge. (2000:169)

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Given that students entering university must now decipher and decode meaning in an academic discourse with which they are unfamiliar at best and unprepared at worst, it is understandable that they are struggling.

A student's limited reading ability is further exacerbated by the sheer volume of reading required at university although programmes targeting reading speed and comprehension appear efficacious (Livingston *et al.* 2015:1). Further, a student's ability to make meaning out of texts through the process of intertextuality enables him or her to gain empowerment in the meaning-making process, opening further doors to literacy (Kalua 2011:5). Boakye (2015:1) also argues that a higher level of self-efficacy, defined as 'the belief about one's ability to perform a task successfully', also influences reading proficiency. Studies have also shown that learning may be further enhanced within a gender-based, single-sex environment (Hughes 2007).

With all of these key areas of learning enhancement in mind, the English Department at the University of Fort Hare, East London campus, designed a reading programme to assist in improving students' academic performance by developing their reading skills.

Presentation of the programme

The Department's reading group initiative originated in 2010 as a voluntary programme for Commerce and Social Work students who were enrolled in a compulsory career-oriented English language course. Given the apparent success of the programme and the need for students to improve their reading skills, the programme was made mandatory for students enrolled in these courses. In comparing the students' English scores from the first semester to the second semester, a remarkable improvement was noted in the results of students participating in the reading programme with 70% of the students increasing in their final grades of their compulsory English courses, one by 35%.

Lack of funds and facilitators resulted in the programme lapsing until the second semester of 2014 and 2015. With the assistance of a Department of Education grant funded through the University's Teaching and Learning Centre, the English Department was able to re-initiate the reading programme. Positive evaluative and academic responses from the students' validated the reinvigoration of the project with special attention to changes in the selected texts.

Programme aims

The reading group project was designed to allow first-year students, who do not engage with literary texts, an opportunity to critically read and interrogate a selection of literature. Many first-year university students who enter specialised degree programmes are required to enrol in English instruction courses specific to their career field. Generally, their English course also has their career track in

mind such that students completing degrees in Commerce and Social Work take a course that develops career-oriented writing and oral presentation skills. Hence, these students often express frustration that their English courses do not allow them to study literature (Lindfors 1996).

While the main motivation of this reading initiative is to improve students' reading, vocabulary, comprehension and conversational skills, another of the objectives is to allow the students the opportunity to read a text at leisure and for enjoyment, instead of for formalised assessment. It is believed that allowing students to develop their reading skills in a non-punitive, pass or fail environment assists them in building confidence in reading silently as well as aloud to an audience of their peers.

In addition to developing reading confidence, the programme aspires to improve the students' reading and analytical skills, motivation to read, and reading comprehension. Analytical thinking is defined as 'developing the capacity to think in a thoughtful, discerning way, to solve problems, to analyse data and recall and use information' (Aymer 2005:1), all skills that are recognised as crucial for success in reading comprehension which Bharuthram's (2012) research indicates enhances student performance.

In this reading programme, the students are exposed to the concept of literary analysis which requires them to search for and interpret the author's intended meaning as well as their own critical response to the text. This skill has the potential to be transferred and applied to their other course work in which critical reading and analysis are pertinent, thus enabling their enhanced reading and interpretative abilities to positively impact their entire academic experience.

When students are reading the novels, they are encouraged to examine specific elements of the text such as its purpose, characterisation, dialogue, and lexis and syntax. The aim here is for the students to further develop their analytical skills which are not only necessary for success in this reading programme, but also within their extended academic and social context. Thus, one should note how this programme aims to accomplish much more than just allowing the students the opportunity to read leisurely in the academic environment. It is designed to build student confidence, improve their analytical skills and enhance their vocabulary and fluency in English as a language of instruction.

With this said, by allowing each student the opportunity to individually read aloud, they should become more fluent in their reading as well as broaden their English vocabulary. Moreover, this additional reading can help them become more effective readers. When reading, the students are actively engaging with the text; they are not only reading the words on the page, but they can see how these words are used in grammatically correct sentences. In this way, the students can improve their conversational skills and also

learn how to use the language accurately when speaking and writing in the academic environment.

Therefore, another goal of this initiative is for students to learn the meaning of English words that are unfamiliar to them and to incorporate these 'new' words into their personal vocabulary when both writing and conversing. With the provision of specific text-based glossaries, providing the definition of words potentially outside the scope of the student's understanding, students would further be able to broaden their vocabulary (Mbulungeni 2010). Additionally, they may be able to recognise the value of discovering the meaning of unfamiliar words, a skill that they could translate into their other course work in which the academic discourse may be new and daunting. In light of these multifocal factors, this reading initiative is designed to assist students in developing the necessary skills to achieve academic, career and personal successes.

Participants

The participants in the 2015 English Department reading programme encompassed 44 first-year university students who were enrolled in the English language class (English for Career Purposes) prescribed by their Social Work Department. Their English module is a course designed to develop the skills essential for social work graduates and emphasises written and oral communication; hence, it does not involve instruction in or the reading of literary texts. All the participants were second-language speakers whose mother tongue language is mainly isiXhosa.

Implementation of programme

Recognising the value of small groups for shared learning (Shober 2008) each reading group was limited to 10 people to ensure quieter, less confident students felt that they were in a safe, participatory environment. This smaller number also enabled every member to read a page aloud as well as afforded time in the 1 h weekly sessions for them to engage in consequential group discussions regarding the text and its meaning.

The groups were also gender-based. Research (Gurian & Ballew 2003; Herr & Arms 2004; Swain & Harvey 2002; Vail 2002), as well as teaching experience in a number of academic and community settings suggests that reading confidence is stifled when men and women must read aloud in front of one another. The lack of reading confidence (Loveless 2015), gender rivalry and fear of recrimination often affected students' performance, what Mael (cited in Herr & Arms 2004) calls the distraction of the 'dating and rating culture'. Hughes (2007:9) supports this evaluation stating in her research on single-sex education that 'attendance improves, distractions decline and student participation increases, all of which serve to maximise student achievement' and ensure self-efficacy. The nervous laughter of the participants when it was explained why men and women would be placed in separate groups appeared to confirm that this insecurity

is a genuine issue affecting oral reading performance. The gendered groups also enabled the selection of texts that targeted the interests of men or women which also served to enhance engagement with the texts and hopefully lead to the residual effect of inculcating a reading culture.

Two female and two male facilitators were selected to direct the weekly 1 h reading sessions. These facilitators were selected not just based on their academic ability, although most of them were securing postgraduate qualifications, but their skill at facilitation, enthusiasm for literature and approachability with the students. The students were asked to select the reading group time suitable to their academic and work schedule, but once in a group, they were required to remain in that group as there were different books assigned to the facilitators and each group would be reading at their own pace. Thus, for textual continuity and comprehension, it was advisable that members remain in their selected groups throughout the course of the semester-long reading programme.

In the initial inception of the project in 2010/2011, the book selected for men was *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. This text was selected not only for its usefulness in helping the students increase their literacy skills of vocabulary, comprehension and analysis, but also to assist them in building their personal life with purpose and confidence. The texts selected for the women's reading group was a series of three texts by American author MaryLu Tyndall. Her texts contained strong, independent female characters, adventurous plots and positive, uplifting outcomes. The department was fortunate to have these texts donated by the author and benefactors interested in investing in a reading programme for the University's English Department.

In response to the research by Villegas and Lucas (2002) on culturally responsive literacy and Smith and Sobel's (2010) research on place-based learning, the texts for the 2014 and 2015 reading groups were altered to focus on the South African sociocultural environment. The men read Peter Abraham's *Mine Boy* and the women read either Sindiwe Magona's collection of short stories *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* or her novel *Beauty's Gift*. Both men and women seemed to find a greater connection to these texts, commenting that they had affinity to the characters and their geopolitical environment. Generally, though it appeared that the women responded more valuably to Magona's texts, perhaps because her texts are more contemporary and relate to issues closer to their current gendered experiences. Each student was given a text to read, during the reading session, affording them the opportunity to physically take ownership of the material and engage personally with the text by reading along with their peers.

In order to assist in evaluating the effectiveness of the reading programme, all participants were given a pre-programme benchmark test in the form of the matric English home language paper of 2013, a paper which assessed grammar,

vocabulary and analytical skills. There were two reasons this form of assessment was chosen. Firstly, it allowed the project leaders to utilise a standard national test rubric to equalise marking and secondly, the students had, for the most part, just exited matric and the test afforded the most up-to-date view of their current level of reading and comprehension. Additionally, the home language version was selected as opposed to the first additional language because students enrolled at the University of Fort Hare are required to read, study and write all of their course work in the English language and are therefore required to function at the capacity of first language speakers regardless of their language background. The correlation of the two results was tabulated in order to evaluate the level of improvement in the students' comprehension abilities and grammar skills. Additionally, the students' English course marks between pre- and post-programme were tabulated to discover if there was any indication of improvement in their academic skills and classroom performance.

At the beginning of each session, facilitators reviewed the events of the text to ensure all the students understood who the characters were and what was happening to them. Participants were also invited to project what they thought might happen in the future, given what they had read and deduced from events up to that point. In every reading session, each student would read at least one full page of text and then the group was asked to orally reflect on the passage. This format was intended to create an environment enabling open discussion, self-confidence and respect for variable interpretative perceptions.

Facilitators also created a glossary which they distributed to each student at the beginning of the session. These weekly glossaries provided the definitions of difficult words found in each chapter, but students were encouraged to request the meaning of any additional terms they did not understand and invited to offer their definitions of these words according to the literary context in which they were found. Facilitators then clarified the meaning of these new words, and advised students to add these terms to their glossary and practice them in conversation throughout the week. The inclusion of a glossary in the programme was designed to assist students in broadening their vocabulary as well as instilling the importance of seeking understanding of unknown words to enable textual comprehension.

Results

Analysis of the pre- and post-test results indicate that there was some improvement in students' comprehension, vocabulary and grammar skills pertaining to their performance in the 2013 matric home language paper. See Appendix 1 for pre-programme benchmark matric test and the post-programme test. Where there was substantial improvement is in their actual results in their English for Career Purposes course between pre- and post-programme attendance or between their first and second semester results.

The informal table below indicates the comparison between pre- and post-matric paper results and the pre- and post-English course results:

- 23 students showed improvement in their pre and post-matric paper results
- 2 students remained the same
- 19 students showed no improvement.

However, the differences in the students' pre- and post-English scores are significant:

- 31 students improved their English scores between the first and second semester
- 1 student improved by 35% (37% – 72%)
- 1 improved by 29% (42% – 71%)
- 1 improved by 24% (48% – 72%)
- 6 improved by over 10%

Only 13 students decreased their English scores with only 2 by 15% (75% – 60%; 72% – 57%) and the remaining by under 10%.

The students were also surveyed for their response to the programme. See Appendix 2 for a copy of the student survey.

Ethical considerations

Because this project was implemented by the English Department to assist students in their literacy skills, it was viewed as similar to a course, workshop or tutorial that the department would provide for students. As such there were no inherent risks to the physical or psychological health of the students who were voluntarily asked to participate in the reading programme. At the outset, students were advised that evidence has illustrated the improvement of previous participants' literacy skills, but no students were coerced to take part. Just as our department does not arrange for informed consent for students to register for English courses, we did not require informed consent to participate in the reading groups.

Reading programme 2015 survey:

Results were as follows:

- 86% of students enjoyed the characters
- 88% found the story interesting
- 84% thought the glossary was helpful
- 93% said the group leader helped them understand and guided them through the story
- 81% feel that being part of the reading group helped increase their vocabulary and reading comprehension
- 91% said that the reading group increased their interest in reading fiction
- 84% feel that it has made a difference in their ability to read academic texts
- 93% believe that the reading group is an important programme and should be continued
- 58% agreed that 1 hour per week was an adequate amount of time.

Several students commented that because they came from rural areas, and English was not their first language, they had limited vocabulary of English words and did not read well aloud. However, after the completion of the programme they felt that their English language comprehension had improved immensely. Some of the specific comments recorded by the students of the programme were:

- 'at first I did not have confidence in reading in front of a group, but this reading class helped me a lot'
- 'reading really helped me, and I have learnt a lot, now I am no longer shy to read at all'
- 'the reading group motivated and encouraged me to read more'
- 'my vocabulary has increased and I am able to speak in front of people'
- 'it was a very good experience as I learnt new words'
- 'it helped me to read and understand what I am reading. If I did not understand a word, there was a glossary available with the meaning of the words and that helped a lot'
- 'It helped me to read and gave me more appetite for reading. The reading session also made me to improve in spelling words'
- 'there were some words that I couldn't pronounce but this book helped me to improve my reading skills'
- 'I am a very shy person and it helped me to talk and participate in the classroom. Now I am not shy to ask a question of my lecturer when I don't understand something'
- 'reading was fun because we had some small debates. It has made me to be able to work with other people and to boost my self-esteem'
- 'the reading group really assisted me in speaking because I am very shy in front of people, more especially when speaking English as I am not sure of the vocabulary'
- 'I am no longer scared of reading out loud because I noticed that I am good at it'
- 'when I read for myself I just read and did not understand what I was reading or even remember what I was reading. The reading class helped me to read with understanding'
- 'it allowed me to concentrate when reading as I usually don't focus on what is being read, just on saying the words correctly'

Most students found that at the beginning of the reading programme the words were difficult and they could not understand what was going on in the story because of this. This participant response was noteworthy to the project leaders as the selected texts were written for a general South African reading audience and did not contain complex academic discourse. Eighty-four percent of the participants responded that the glossaries were highly beneficial, especially with the available opportunity to question other unknown words and add them to their glossary. This process, they believed, helped their English vocabulary to improve and enabled them to more easily comprehend what they were reading.

By offering students the opportunity to ask about unfamiliar words, facilitators learnt the limitations in the participants' vocabulary as well as the serious derailment to vocabulary that a limited reading background had cost these students. As a result, this experience assisted the facilitators and project leaders to adapt their tutoring and teaching in other classes, as they recognised the limited English literacy of many of their students.

At the beginning of the programme, students were reluctant to read a whole page aloud and when the group was asked who would like to go first, eyes were downcast and no one wanted to volunteer. However, a few weeks into the programme few students had any hesitation in reading aloud and all were eager to participate. Facilitators noted a marked improvement in the confidence and reading ability of all students who participated in the reading programme. As a facilitator attests, one student enthusiastically if not unwittingly reported that this was the first time he had ever finished reading a book.

Eighty-four percent of the participants felt that their involvement in the reading programme benefited them academically and applied the skills they had acquired through the reading programme to other areas of study. This response can be evidenced in the improvement to their English course marks. Additionally, 85% of the participants requested assistance in their essay writing skills through the implementation of department workshops and were willing to invest their time and energy in attending these voluntary classes, which further illustrates their interest in improving their academic skills. A further 91% felt it increased their interest in reading fiction, which as research suggests will strengthen literacy. It is also noteworthy that over half the students improved in their comprehension and grammar matric scores as a result of their participation in the programme. What is the most significant results is the improvement in their scores in their English for Career Purposes academic subject with 70% of the students (31 out of 44 participants) showing an increase in their course marks, one improving by over 35% and two by over 24%.

Conclusion

Given the participants' improved academic results, illustrated significantly in the fact that 70% of the students' increased English course scores, the researchers conclude that the design of the programme accomplished the intended objectives. By engaging in a reading programme, students' reading confidence increases, their English vocabulary expands and their analytical skills improve. Providing a glossary allows students to learn the meaning of unfamiliar words, which they can then incorporate into their vocabulary, enabling them to understand an ever-expanding range of terms. By finding enjoyment in reading for leisure, students can discover the value of reading beyond the academic environment, thus magnifying the benefits designed within a literacy programme.

The design of this reading programme can be transferred into community-based projects, as the project leaders ascertained when they implemented it at a local centre for impoverished women and their children. Therefore, this reading initiative, with the necessary adjustments to texts, facilitators and times, also has the potential to be an effectual tool in enhancing reading comprehension for participants involved in other non-governmental, non-academic programmes in the community.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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Appendix 1

TABLE 1-A1: Reading programme pre- and post-test results for benchmark and class marks 2015: Pre- versus post-test and English course marks.

Student number	Pre/ECP 111 E	Post/ECP 122 E
1†	56/76	58/86
2†	14/59	42/64
3‡	54/75	57/60
4†	56/78	44/80
5‡	56/75	56/72
6†	72/72	60/75
7†	44/67	46/70
8†	38/73	43/84
9†	52/59	42/72
10‡	46/75	52/72
11†	48/60	50/64
12†	44/68	46/77
13†	56/58	60/60
14†	54/58	42/72
15†	50/65	22/67
16‡	56/71	38/68
17‡	38/68	44/60
18‡	62/75	66/70
19†	32/60	20/64
20†	12/37	54/72
21†	44/66	62/72
22†	32/57	34/60
23†	52/48	38/72
24†	40/63	34/78
25‡	62/69	36/62
26†	40/70	44/72
27‡	64/72	40/57
28‡	52/79	30/75
29‡	38/62	40/60
30†	48/50	60/65
31†	34/42	24/71
32†	42/58	30/62
33‡	46/73	34/64
34†	48/75	30/78
35†	28/64	30/66
36†	50/58	54/64
37†	48/71	36/81
38†	56/72	60/75
39‡	44/70	58/63
40†	48/66	24/70
41†	64/78	48/82
42‡	52/73	58/72
43†	52/62	54/63
44†	48/62	48/66

†, improved scores; ‡, decreased scores.

Appendix 2

Reading programme survey 2015

Please answer the questions below by circling your selected number in which the number 1 indicates least liked or least agree and 5 being most liked or most agree. The name of my book was:

1. I enjoyed the characters in the book I read and understood the challenges they were facing.

1 2 3 4 5

2. I found the story itself and the setting interesting and learnt about South African's struggles.

1 2 3 4 5

3. The words were difficult and because I didn't understand them, I didn't know what was going on in the story.

1 2 3 4 5

4. The glossary was helpful and I used it to learn new words and understand the story better.

1 2 3 4 5

5. The reading group leader helped me understand the story and guided my reading.

1 2 3 4 5

6. An hour once a week was an adequate amount of time for the reading programme.

1 2 3 4 5

7. Being part of the reading group has definitely helped me increase my vocabulary and reading comprehension.

1 2 3 4 5

8. Being part of the reading group has increased my interest in reading fiction for enjoyment.

1 2 3 4 5

9. Being part of the reading group has made a difference in my ability to read other academic texts.

1 2 3 4 5

10. I believe the reading group is an important programme and should be continued to help other students.

1 2 3 4 5

In addition to the reading programme I would also like to have a workshop on:

- Essay writing
- Critical reading and listening skills
- Research and referencing