

Short Stories and Voltage Meters: Literature in L2 English Academic Writing Instruction

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Introduction

Convincing arguments have been made for eliminating the divide between literature and language instruction largely based on the rejection of a distinct literary type of language. This is seen, for example, in Geoff Hall's 2005 book, *Literature in Language Education*, and Amos Paran's 2006 work, *Literature in Language Teaching and Learning*. The greater personal engagement experienced with literary versus informational texts, and a more open, non-canonical concept of literature further support including literature in language instruction.

Personal experience assisting Spanish university professors with their L2 English publications adds weight to these arguments. Decontextualized, sentence level exercises often seem irrelevant as many of the flaws encountered in these advanced learners' texts are not language errors, but rather problems relating to meaning, reference and narrative flow.

Day & Bamford, in their 1998 book, *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*, argue convincingly for the use of extensive reading (also referred to as free, voluntary reading) in second language instruction. In this type of reading, texts do not pose difficulties in terms of grammar or vocabulary. The material is self-selected by learners, and is thus truly interesting and / or enjoyable (if not, readers are encouraged to abandon them). Further, literature is conceived of in a broad, non-canonical way, including a wholehearted acceptance of “language learner literature” (which includes graded readers and other works especially written with language learners in mind). And lastly, students read as much as possible both in, and especially, out of class.

Extensive reading seems particularly useful for academics writing in L2 English. These learners write about theories and technologies that language instructors often have little knowledge of. The semi-technical and everyday expressions these writers need to describe, link and sequence these elements are familiar to them, yet they are often misused in their written production. Many authors have identified these more everyday expressions as posing greater problems for academic writers than technical language. An excellent example is Pérez-Llantada, and others, in their 2011 article, “You don't say what you know, only what you can”: The perceptions and practices of senior Spanish academics regarding research dissemination in English”.

Another background issue relates to motivation. Several academics, including some in our study group, have expressed a desire to take a break from their field of study when they work on English. In this way, language

study is experienced as a welcome change. This is certainly relevant to findings about the role of pleasure in both first and second language learning, described in the books mentioned earlier, the 2008 book by Rozema and Webb, *Literature and the Web*, and Nell's 1998 study, *Lost in a Book*.

In this initial study, literary texts were introduced, both written and in multimedia format, into informal classes with a small group of engineering professors who regularly publish in English. Empirical evidence is sought regarding the participants' enjoyment of literature, to determine if this approach seems promising for further study. This research involves university professors and graduate students as they are good candidates for ongoing longitudinal studies, long identified as lacking in the research on literature and language education (LLE). I am also interested in preliminary data as to whether extensive reading, for pleasure, can lead to improvements in academic writing.

Method

The subjects in this study are engineering professors and graduate students at a public university in northern Spain, who participated in workshop style classes outside of any formal academic program. I have known some of the participants for approximately three years as a result of revising their academic articles on an occasional basis. Our group evolved over the course of the academic year 2011 - 12. We began with two participants, a senior professor who also heads a research group, and a junior professor in the same research group, with his doctoral dissertation to be presented by year's end. They were mainly interested in improving their speaking

abilities but were open to my suggestions to also work on their writing. We met once a week for about an hour and a half, and, from September until June, we met for a total of 40 hours.

It was made clear from the outset that I planned to include literary texts in our sessions, and that they would be asked to read for enjoyment. Thus, we have mainly worked with two types of texts; their academic articles, and literary texts. As they completed an article, they would give it to me for review. I would then read through it and send them my comments and questions, which we would then discuss when we met. Depending on publication deadlines, the mix of our class sessions would vary between this and the literary and pleasure reading activities.

After some months, I urged them to consider expanding the group, partly to enrich the activity, and partly for more research data. In February, three additional members of their department and research group joined our sessions. These members are a graduate student in the doctoral program, and two additional young professors, both of whom are doctors.

In April, the participants were asked to not only present examples of their academic writing but also some less formal writing. The purpose was to provide learners with an intermediate step between their extensive reading and their academic writing. Also in April, they were asked to start a reading log to record the amount of extensive reading done every day. No amount of reading was specified by me; rather they were to establish their own reading target amount consistent with their personal goals and situation. Partly to help them incorporate daily reading into busy schedules, I suggested a minimum target of 15 minutes a day.

As they are already L2 English academic writers, many of whom with numerous publications in international journals, I planned to assist them with their writing during the writing process, rather than only after receiving completed papers. While I raised this idea several times during our sessions, this rarely occurred. Basically, I received academic writing samples in the form of full articles which they asked me to review and “correct”.

Self-selection of texts was encouraged, but I also provided some texts. All this material was imaginative in nature, either poetry, short stories or extracts from longer works. Most were authentic texts but some material from graded readers was also included. One reason for providing texts was to assist them in determining a comfortable level of difficulty for extensive reading. Another reason was to open their minds to various literary genres, and to, in a way, re-introduce them to literature. I also made use of these texts as models of language use, referring to them at times to illustrate language issues under discussion.

Results

As for results, in a way the ongoing nature of our sessions is an indication of some success. Dr. Carrera, a senior professor at my university, argues that this experiment would have ended long ago if these professors found no benefit. Not only has this not been the case, but plans are in place to continue our sessions, possibly with increased hours, over the next academic year. It should be remembered that these sessions have been undertaken outside of formal training auspices, thus providing the participants with no formal recognition for their professional transcripts.

In addition, lively class discussions on literary texts indicated that the reader-response approach was stimulating for them. At first, rather than construct meaning for themselves, and truly engage with the texts, they asked me for the “correct” meaning, but this changed over time.

In terms of benefits to writing, one student clearly feels positive as seen in her response to the question on an informal yearend survey recent questionnaire, “Do you think that your English language extensive reading is helping your academic writing, and if so, how?” She wrote;

Yes, I do. I believe that reading is the first step to writing well. I enlarge my vocabulary, I learn useful expressions and I'm more in shape with English.

On the other hand, as Day & Bamford (1998) cautions, resistance to undertaking extensive reading is a common problem, and one that was observed. In January, 2012, I gave copies of Day & Bamford’s extensive reading principles to the group, yet it was necessary to continue clarifying them until the end of June. As an example, one participant replied as follows to the question about how to determine if a work is appropriate for extensive reading:

It depends how important it is for you to read the text. In other words, you can decide by how much you need it for your career.

This supports the claim in Day & Bamford (and seconded by many in my department) that learners fail to recognize the potential value of reading for pleasure in the L2, and especially texts that are at a comfortable reading level.

Some of this, of course, may have been due to my shortcomings in leading the group. Perhaps they were left too much on their own to find their way to enjoyable English language reading. In fact, when asked directly as to why they thought they had not found texts that they really enjoyed, S2 said that he had trouble finding them. While he admitted that there were certainly texts of infinite variety on the internet, he didn't know where to find them. Also, he doesn't like to read for pleasure with computers, ebooks, or the like. And, he is reluctant to purchase material that he is unsure he will like. All this makes sense, and partly as a result of this, I sent them several links to multimedia versions of poems they might like. At the next class, most of them had printed the poems and had listened to them on the internet. They also said that they liked them and planned to read them a bit more to work on several language and comprehension problems that they had. They could have been more active in seeking out reading material - but so could have I, it seems.

It must be admitted that over the course of our sessions the participants did not manifest particularly strong increases in their enjoyment of reading. On introducing the practice of maintaining a reading log, I pointed out the importance of establishing a personal reading target amount, and of also scheduling this reading time. Only by way of example, I suggested that it might be necessary to consider a minimum amount of something like 15 minutes a day. In subsequent sessions, while some had started a reading log, it wasn't clear that much thought had been given to the issue of personal targets, and those who were maintaining a log were applying the minimum time of 15 minutes as their daily reading time. More recent insights into their level of reading enjoyment come from a class discussion

in early June. I had asked them to come prepared to discuss their reading targets and schedules with the other class members. Nobody had prepared any specific plans to share with the group. To this, I probed further by asking them to kick some ideas around spontaneously. Several members of the group spoke of reading a couple of days during the workweek only, as the weekend is for relaxation.

However, while the increase may have not been dramatic, it does seem that the participants' enjoyment of reading literature did go up as a result of our sessions. This is reflected in some responses to the question, "What did you like most about these sessions?" that appeared on our yearend questionnaire. One participant expressed real satisfaction about reading more, as seen in the following;

I like that since I attend sessions I have read more in English than in all my life, I try to search more things in English to practice and at least once a week I can listen and speak in English with other people.

Another participant suggested that language learning as a result of pleasurable reading is more likely to be retained.

What I like the most is that I can continue improving my English level and I do not forget what I have learnt.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of literature was seen to be enjoyable for these engineering professors, and thus, this approach does indeed seem promising. Several limitations to this preliminary study should be mentioned. Time was certainly one, as relatively short weekly sessions do

not seem sufficient to bring about significant language learning. This limitation was exacerbated by the fact that many of the participants, all busy academics, were also involved in other formal instruction. Another limitation stems from the nature of the study, which likely would have been lessened by more sharply focused research questions. Further research is required to address these issues, as well as to contribute to the generally accepted need for more longitudinal studies. Such studies are necessary to investigate the development of the reading habit over time, and thus to be able to effectively explore the impact of such reading on academic writing.

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