Encouraging Creative Reading in EFL Classroom

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Abstract: In the past two years there has been a shift in focus of English language teaching at tertiary level in Oman from general reading texts to academic texts, yet, the philosophy seems to remain that our students need to be encouraged to read extensively for pleasure to help to promote a culture of reading and foster intercultural education and literacy. Therefore, stories that present various aspects of Oman’s distinctive identities and its rich and diverse intangible cultural heritage might be useful in this regard. However, this is still an area that few have explored in language learning and communication skills development. Using the examples from local stories in English, this paper discusses how local stories can encourage creative reading, educate and enrich our students and provide them an enjoyable opportunity to learn the English language, increase vocabulary, and improve communication skills.

Introduction

The role of English as a lingua franca and the increasing digitization of the world have translated into the present era being one of enhanced communication and networking; however, the crux of the matter is that of communication, sharing stories and knowledge across diverse languages, cultures and communities. In this context, Oman is no exception, being a repository of a myriad of stories that document and observe the country’s cultural evolution, and illuminate its many hidden facets. These stories are a very valuable educational resource since they present various aspects of Oman’s distinctive identities and its rich and diverse intangible cultural heritage. They can also be used effectively to encourage creative reading in the English language classroom when utilized as a supplement to core academic textbooks, thereby motivating and enriching our students, while providing them with an enjoyable opportunity to learn English, increase vocabulary, and improve communication skills.

The teaching of reading skills using the English language in tertiary education institutions in Oman is considered vital for all academic courses taught through the medium of English. The authors’ teaching context is the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University where the crucial role that reading and vocabulary play in the learning of English is understood. For example, science students studying in the final English Foundation Program courses have four hours of reading a week with a focus on reading academic texts related to their degree majors and the use of some texts of a general nature as supplementary texts. These supplementary general nature texts are available on Moodle accompanied by compulsory quizzes, and in addition students are encouraged to read four graded readers or simplified novels each semester and take the accompanying quizzes which are available on moodlereader.com. According to the Foundation Program documents, assessment of reading across all English Foundation Program courses at Sultan Qaboos University focuses on test methods: MCQ, T/F/NI, matching, ordering/ categorizing/choosing from list, gap filling, answering questions, re-arranging jumbled sentences, note completion, table/chart completion, selecting/prioritizing relevant factual information/opinion and task types used in the course materials (Foundation Program: http://www.squ.edu.om/tabid/9131/language/en-US/Default.aspx). So students need to go beyond basic reading competency in order to
achieve good passing grades so that reading creatively does not only benefit our students in the long term as lifelong learners but even in short-term FP assessment goals.

Through activities using both academic and general text types, students learn a number of reading skills including: skimming and scanning a text for main ideas and specific information, organizing notes based on the text, and working out the meaning of words from their context. They are also expected to be able to make inferences, distinguish fact from opinion, draw conclusions based on explicit and implicit information, understand different text structures, predict outcomes based on given information, identify arguments for and against certain issues, and identify the writer’s attitude and point of view (Foundation Program: http://www.squ.edu.om/tabid/9131/language/en-US/Default.aspx).

In order to assist students in acquiring the above skills, teachers use activities such as discussions that activate prior knowledge; comprehension activities: multiple choice, true and false questions, matching, ordering and categorizing tasks; vocabulary activities: gap filling, word formation questions; summarizing; note completion and table or chart completion activities where they select or prioritize relevant factual information and opinions. Teachers themselves try to relate the context of the text to the students’ own conceptual framework to stimulate interest. They also encourage students to see ‘reading texts’ in the world around them, in newspapers, adverts, pamphlets, etc. to develop a sense of curiosity and interest in language (Foundation Program: http://www.squ.edu.om/tabid/9131/language/en-US/Default.aspx).

However, during the past two years there has been a shift in focus from general English reading texts to academic English reading texts. This shift has partially been determined by the requirements of the Foundation Program whose goal, according to Dr Badria Ibrahim Al Shihhi, Head of the Foundation Program, is “improving students’ English language proficiency, with some emphasis on technical and business applications in preparation for their undergraduate courses” (Foundation Program: http://www.squ.edu.om/tabid/9131/language/en-US/Default.aspx). Yet, the philosophy seems to remain that our students need to be encouraged to read extensively for pleasure to help to promote a culture of reading.

Willy Renandya, author of “The Power of Extensive Reading”, argues that “the benefits derived from diverse studies on extensive reading in many different contexts are so compelling that it will be inconceivable for teachers not to make it an important feature of their teaching” (Renandya, 2007:134). Clearly there is a place for the intensive reading of academic texts, and intensive and extensive reading should not be seen as being in opposition, as both serve different but complementary purposes (Carrell and Carson 1997; Nuttall 1982 cited in Renandaya, 2007:135). Nonetheless, intensive reading seems to have become the dominant mode of teaching reading in many language classrooms even though research shows “that intensive reading alone will not help learners develop their reading fluency, a crucial skill that mature readers acquire only after repeated exposure to massive quantities of written text” (Renandya, 2007).

In the Foundation Program at Sultan Qaboos University students are encouraged to engage in extensive reading at all proficiency levels. Large numbers of readers have been made available to the learners as part of their reading courses and it is considered that by providing access to such stories that students will be given opportunities to enhance their English vocabulary and general English skills. Various genres are available, mysteries, modern day
crime stories, ghost stories and of course the classics to name but a few. The stories have mostly been written or abridged for English language learners all over the world and are ones that relate to the target culture and some other cultures but rarely to our own students’ particular culture.

Thus it can be seen that our students have a variety of supplementary language activities to enhance their reading skills: graded readers and SRA reading kits in the Language Centre library, as well as program-specific on-line materials and Moodle exercises (Foundation Program Curricula, p.14). As reading teachers, we are generally aware that reading a text should always have a purpose, which our students should be aware of. It is also important to relate the context of the text to the students’ own world/conceptual framework in order to stimulate interest and we should encourage our students to see ‘reading texts’ in the world around them, in newspapers, adverts, pamphlets, etc. to develop a sense of curiosity and interest in language (Foundation Program Curricula, p.11).

Furthermore, in order to achieve the reading learning outcomes for the English component of the Foundation program in the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University, for example, interpreting texts using background knowledge, making inferences based on information in a text, identifying the writer’s point of view, distinguishing between facts and opinions, identifying arguments for and against a certain issue in a text and identifying attitude and point of view in fiction (Foundation Program Curricula, p.48), students need to be engaged more deeply with the texts in order to go beyond basic reading competence and to reach the full meaning of the text. The authors of this paper argue that this can be achieved through creative reading.

Reading as a creative activity

In spite of the lack of consensus on strategies and approaches to reading, both target culture and local literatures are valued by educators in foreign language teaching in Oman. They are viewed as a source of linguistic, content, cultural and formal knowledge, and are regarded as effective (Day, 1994; Al-Brashdi, 2002; Al-Ajmi, 2006; Al-Mahroqi, 2007) for aiding students with their progress, creating meaningful learning environments (Smith, 1988) and bridging the language with the context in which it is used (Byram, 1988). Thus they not only expose the students as English language learners to new vocabulary, style, structures and experiences, but they also relate to and show approval of the students’ own cultural and social context. Moreover, the known social context these stories provide can be an effective bridge enabling students to engage with new contexts and practices, especially for students who have a limited language learning experience and have little opportunity to practice their English language skills outside the classroom. However, learning with literatures, namely short stories has not been widely used as a supplement to core-text books and as a learning support in the foreign language classroom in higher education in Oman due to many social, cultural, linguistic and even logistical reasons. This limited use, however, appears to be rooted not only in general English language teaching and learning practices, students’ interests and motivations, and teachers’ own language learning experiences and perceived images, but also in the very aims and objectives of the courses taught.

In the context of language learning reading is often considered as a skill. Perhaps this is why Small and Arnone (2011) point out that it is “often thought of as a skill, something to be learned and practiced” (p.13). However, they further go on to say, “But reading can also be considered a creative art, capturing the imagination of the reader in ways that result in
creative thought and expression” (Small & Arnone, 2011:13). According to the Arts Council report (Creative research, 24 April 2009), reading is said to be creative when there is a change in the reader during the reading of the book; when the reader is encouraged to enter the world of the characters in the book, imagining the scene and even becoming one of the characters. The report declares that because of this there will also be an emotional effect on the reader, such as happiness, sadness, fear, remorse, pleasure, etc. (Creative research, 24 April 2009). Therefore, some changes will have a long-lasting effect on the reader and can be beneficial, giving the reader insights into other worlds enabling them perhaps to change the way they look at things, and see them in a different and maybe a better way (Creative research, 24 April 2009).

Reading as a creative activity includes the reader’s own interpretation of the work and could involve the reader discussing/writing about what they have read. Creative reading can include reading aloud, as one does, for example, to children, which can be rather like putting on a performance, and be creative because the reader tries to have different voices for characters and puts expression into his voice when describing something (Creative research, 24 April 2009). When reading provokes discussion/writing and engages the reader it can be said to be creative, whatever the reading is: whether it is about travel, people’s lives, facts, or fiction and the motivation to read creatively will be enhanced in an environment “that encourages selection autonomy, i.e. when students can choose the reading materials that are both interesting and meaningful to them” (Small & Arnone, 2011:14).

Stories from the Omani students’ culture in the English Foundation Program classroom

“Glimpses of Oman: Ten Stories about a Beautiful Country and its People” published by Sultan Qaboos University as the Language Centre in-house reading materials was one of the books that was used by the Language Centre teachers’ to motivate their students to engage regularly in reading in English for pleasure and creative reading. By taking a cross-cultural position in the classroom, teachers also aimed at focusing on the students’ culture; contributing to students’ experience; activating personal/academic / professional interests; involving students in language activities that “sensitized students to various cultural aspects” (Schumm, 2012). This approach simulated real life situations and contexts, and enhanced their cultural awareness, which, according to Tomalin and Stempleski (1993), encompasses three qualities: awareness of one’s own culturally-induced behavior, awareness of the culturally-induced behaviour of others and ability to explain one’s own cultural standpoint (p.5).

The stories in Glimpses of Oman are mainly about inspirational people in Oman who our learners may or may not have heard a lot about before. Nonetheless, the context will certainly be familiar to them and this background knowledge should give students the confidence to read in English. Oman: At the Crossroads of Culture examines the role Oman’s particular geographical position has played in influencing its cultural composition. Souks of Oman questions whether large hypermarket chains are threatening Omani souks and potentially causing their decline. In the story Building Heritage – Custodians of Oman two young Omani men take the initiative of converting an ancestral 120 year old mud house in their village of Al Hamra into a museum in order to safe-guard heritage pieces for future generations. While in Strongholds of Heritage, Forts, and Castles of Oman a well-known Muscat art critic and cultural commentator, Patricia Groves, documents in detail the extraordinarily complex architectural heritage of Oman in her book, Strongholds of Heritage: Forts and Castles of Oman. In Oman, halwa still reigns supreme as dessert, often served with qahwa, or Omani
coffee to guests. The Halwa story takes a peep inside a halwa factory in Al Amirat near Muscat and documents the process by which halwa is prepared. A community-oriented initiative resulted in the women of Sidab, a fishing village located near Muttrah, channeling their sewing talents towards producing beautiful cloth-bags bearing a distinctive Omani imprint. This initiative is described in Sewing Futures: Sisterhood of Sidab Sewing Woman. The story titled Omani Girls Pursuing Sport discusses the governmental efforts and presence of inspiring Omani sportswomen as role models in the country. Omani Women Fashion Designers is about two Omani women who seek to carve out their individual fashion identities in the local and regional domain. A visual, conceptual, and video artist, Hassan Meer is one of Oman’s most well-known artists. In Hassan Meer – Exploring New Trends of Art, he takes the readers through his artistic journey from his childhood to contemporary times. Anticipated to be the largest botanic garden in the Arabian Peninsula upon completion, the Oman Botanic Garden aspires to preserve, protect, and educate about Oman’s botanical heritage, and the story of this project is the last story in the book.

Reading activities in reading classes are often limited to checking reading comprehension and vocabulary, which may enable the learner to gain a basic reading competence but these tasks are unlikely to encourage our students to become creative lifelong readers (Small & Arnone, 2011). To lead to better understanding of Omani culture and traditions, and creative reading, the book also provides a platform to guide independent and curriculum-based English language learning with exercises and lexicographic references that can help the reader to get the most out of the interaction with the stories. Each story is followed by a glossary and five exercises, namely “Understanding the Story”, “Vocabulary”, “Speaking”, “Writing” and “Discussion”. Integrated exercises employ a culture-based cooperative philosophy. They address multiple language skills, critical and creative thinking skills and promote comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition. The use of the exercises for individual, pair and small group work may provide a natural atmosphere of learning and a way to practice English language skills, therefore encouraging the creative use of English inside and outside the classroom.

“Understanding the Story” is aimed at finding the depth of students’ understanding of the stories and includes discussing the main idea, multiple choice questions about the main idea and answering questions about the story. For example: In your opinion what is the main idea of the story? Choose one and put a tick (√).

“Vocabulary” exercises help students to apply the words from the stories in an authentic and natural way. This section includes matching, completing the sentence, explaining words to a partner, writing new sentences and explaining words in context. For example: Check your understanding of the vocabulary by completing the following sentences with the most suitable word from the above list. You may need to change the form of the word.

“Speaking” is aimed at motivating students’ speaking and discussing the stories. The exercises in this section ask students to talk, to discuss individually, in pairs or in small groups some questions about the content of the story. For example: a) What is special about Oman’s geographical position? b) What has Oman focused on during the reign of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos? c) What are the three indicators of Omani cultural change? d) What is the attitude of the Omani people to the past? e) What does a country’s culture tell us about?

“Writing” is aimed at motivating students’ writing and helping them to display their writing skills. This section of exercises includes writing a summary, a postcard, a letter, an e-mail, an
opinion about the story and descriptions of its characters and events. For example: a) Write a letter to your friend about traditional costumes in Oman. b) Write a summary of the story. c) Bring in a picture of a castle or fort in Oman and write a paragraph describing the castle or fort. d) Research the history of a fort/castle and write a short history in your own words. e) Look at the photos. Describe one of Hassan’s paintings shown here. What does this painting mean to you? f) Write about any Omani artist who is most known to you.

The “Discussion” section is aimed at practicing new language skills. There are exercises that may engage students in a discussion of the story or various situations behind it. For example: a) Discuss with another student or in groups what Omani culture tells us about. b) Discuss with another student or in groups what young Omanis think about past. c) Discuss with another student or in groups why the souqs are important in modern Oman. d) Discuss with another student or in groups the traditional importance of Mutrah souq. e) Discuss with another student or in groups the importance of museums for preserving Omani culture and cultural heritage. f) Discuss with another student or in groups the importance of individual efforts to promote Omani culture and cultural heritage.

According to one of the teachers who piloted the book with Foundation Program students, it “added a dynamic touch” to their reading class, and enabled students to “gain added insights into this beautiful country and its people” (See Appendix 1). Another teacher in her feedback wrote: “It is very well known that stories are one of the best ways to teach English and the inspiring stories in this book provide excellent examples of the Omani culture. They provide a base that the students feel secure to relate to, write and talk about. The stories also relate to reality as they mention real examples from the society and the success they have achieved. They also cover a wide range of areas/ themes ranging from fashion to food. This is very motivating and encouraging for the students.” In the opinion of the students (See Appendix 2), stories were interesting and nice. Though there were some preferences in choosing stories for reading (e.g., male students did not choose topics connected to women (The Sidab Sewing Women, Girls Perusing Sport, and the story about fashion) or topics about Souks and Halwa), most students who gave their feedback felt that the stories were engaging and of particular interest to them.

Conclusion

Our experience of integrating local stories in English into reading classes in the Foundation Program at Sultan Qaboos University has demonstrated that by creating an experience rather than simply asking students to gather information (Creative research, 24 April 2009) teachers can encourage creative reading, educate and enrich students and provide them an enjoyable opportunity to learn the English language, increase vocabulary, and improve communication skills. Local stories do not only expose the students as English language learners to new vocabulary, style, structures and experiences, but they also relate to the students’ own cultural and social context. Additionally, by effectively engaging the students in familiar contexts and practices, these stories appear to provide useful support for the students who have a limited language learning experience and have little opportunity to practice their English language skills outside the classroom. Moreover, by immersing our students in texts which they can relate to, because of a culturally familiar environment, the intention is to enable them to read creatively and to go beyond basic reading competence and hence give them the opportunity to be enriched and inspired by their reading experience.
References


Appendix 1

Using Local Stories in the Classroom: Learning Practices Beyond the Core Academic Textbook

Part 1 Feedback from the teachers

Dear Teacher,

Thank you so much for piloting the book “Glimpses of Oman: Ten Stories about a Beautiful Country and its People” by V. Tuzlukova, P. Sacheti, C. Eltayeb and A. Gilhooly. We’ll be very grateful to you if you give your feedback on the book.

1. Can you, please, describe the book briefly?

___________________________________________________________________________

2. Please, give your personal opinion about the book

___________________________________________________________________________

3. Please, share your opinion about the structure of the book, its technical details, including writing style, language, grammatical errors, atmosphere, etc.

___________________________________________________________________________

4. Please, point out both the good and bad aspects of using the book as a reading component in Level 6 program

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

5. Would you recommend the book to other teachers?

___________________________________________________________________________

Thank you so much for your true and honest answers.
Appendix 2

Using Local Stories in the Classroom: Learning Practices Beyond the Core Academic Textbook

Part 2 Feedback from the students

Dear Student,

Thank you so much for reading stories from the book “Glimpses of Oman: Ten Stories about a Beautiful Country and its People” by V. Tuzlukova, P. Sacheti, C. Eltayeb and A. Gilhooly. We’ll be very grateful to you if you give your feedback on the book.

Section: _____________________________                                 Date: ____________

1. What was, in your opinion, the authors’ purpose in writing the book?

__________________________________________________________________________

2. Which stories did you read? Please place a check mark in the box to show the stories/articles you read. Then give your opinion by circling the comment and write a few words to explain your opinion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oman: at the Crossroads of Culture</th>
<th>Souks of Oman</th>
<th>Building Heritage Custodians of Oman</th>
<th>Strongholds of Heritage: Forts and Castles of Oman</th>
<th>Halwa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3. Why did you decide to read this story/stories?

__________________________________________________________________________

4. Do you like to read stories about Oman and Omani people? Why? ____________________________

5. What did you like in the story?

__________________________________________________________________________

6. What did you dislike in the story?

__________________________________________________________________________

7. Did the authors keep you interested?

__________________________________________________________________________

8. Share a quote from the book
9. Share a favourite part of the book

______________________________________________________________

10. Were the glossaries useful?

______________________________________________________________

11. Was the language easy or difficult?

______________________________________________________________

12. What did you like most about the exercises?

______________________________________________________________

13. What did you like least about the exercises?

______________________________________________________________

14. What did you think of the cover?

______________________________________________________________

15. What did you think about the photos in the book?

______________________________________________________________

16. Did you learn something new from the book?

______________________________________________________________

17. What will be your lasting impression of the subject of the book?

______________________________________________________________

18. Would you recommend the book? How would you rate it?

______________________________________________________________

Thank you so much.