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A CASE STUDY ON HOW EXTENSIVE READING DEVELOPS STUDENTS' BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE AND CONTRIBUTES TO THE CONTENT KNOWLEDGE OF CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

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Abstract

The study investigates how extensive reading (ER) develops students' background knowledge and how it contributes to the content knowledge of the classroom discussion. The study was conducted at one of MARA colleges at the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia involving 12 semester 4 students. The students completed the Reading Response Journal after their ER process. The findings of the study showed that ER allowed the students to develop their background knowledge through developing new ideas and concept, improving their understanding of the content knowledge, expanding their knowledge by viewing new standpoints and perspectives of the content knowledge, and supporting their ideas or premises with relevant information and reference to others' work. ER allowed the students to develop their background knowledge and assist them in reading independently. This study implicates that the use of ER can help students in preparing the relevant content for their group discussions.

Keywords: Extensive reading, students' background knowledge, classroom discussion.

INTRODUCTION

Building background knowledge through wide reading is important as it would improve students' achievement (Fisher, Ross & Grant, 2010). There are beliefs that students' lack of sufficient background knowledge has resulted in their failure to integrate information from what they have read and make connection with the content area classroom discussion. Particularly, failure to develop background knowledge can have a negative impact on the students' ability in questioning, meaning making, and developing overall understanding of the new knowledge.

Background knowledge is the knowledge in which the students have already developed. It is what the students have gained through the experience with people, places, reading materials and formal classroom teaching (Fisher, Frey & Lapp, 2012). According to Marzano (2004) this knowledge can be developed through direct or indirect experiences may it involved classroom activities or beyond-classroom independent learning.

Students' without adequate background knowledge are not going to participate and express their opinions in the discussion. Hativah (2001) found that lack of knowledge is one of the factors which lead to this alarming situation. The students are unwilling to voice out their thoughts as they know that they do not have adequate background knowledge on the topic discussed (Peng, 2014; Yin, 2009). Students who are lack of adequate background knowledge would not be able to contribute any information to the discussion and they are likely to struggle in order to progress in

the content area of discussion (Campbell & Campbell, 2009). The students are going to rely much on their experience and background knowledge to form an idea or opinion to be contributed to the discussion (Wang & Woo, 2007). They are also going to use their skills and background knowledge to analyse and evaluate the topic of discussion and the response contributed by their friends before they give any feedback (Bhenam & Pouriran, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, there are two ways to develop the students' background knowledge: either through direct experience, or through indirect experience. Comparing both approaches in developing background knowledge, the indirect experience would be the best approach to develop the students' background knowledge as direct experience such as fieldtrips and study tours can take a lot of time and cost. ER, on the other hand, can be conducted by the students independently without the assistance of the teacher.

ER has been used as one of the ways for the students to learn a second language as it offers its own advantages. According to Waring (2011), ER allows the students to be aware of their own language learning development. It also allows the students to expand their knowledge of the second language and knowledge of the world (Iwahori, 2008). The students can read and learn from the many cultures presented in the reading materials, which some of the students won't be able to experience it first-hand. The ER materials provide the medium for the students to explore the world without having the need to move around. Thus, ER offers the opportunities for students to expand their knowledge of the world (Yamashita, 2013) and knowledge of the language at the same time. It is also an excellent and indirect way to develop the students' background knowledge where the students are able to meet people, visit places and times that otherwise they would not be able to have experience in without reading (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012).

METHODS

This is a case study in which a class of semester 4 students from Diploma in English Communication (DECOM) were chosen as participants. The participants have registered for 'Critical Literacy', a Semester 4 course which requires the participants to critically analyze and evaluate the meaning of text which relates to issues of equity, power, and social justice to inform a critical stance. One of the requirements of the course was that the students had to conduct a series of analysis and discussion (perspective of the article, purpose, positioning and what they believe can be the impacts towards the audience) on the articles selected for the course. For this task, participants were given at least a week as it was compulsory for them to have good premises or counter arguments to support their view or belief of the issue or topic described. Prior to the classroom discussion, the participants have independently read materials on the assigned theme/topic. They, individually, had to look for two reading sources which can help to develop a deeper understanding of the topic/task assigned and share the input they gained from the ER with their group members. A self-designed Reading Response Journal form was distributed to the participants for them to write their reflection of both reading materials. The data from the journal entries were analysed using the document analysis procedures based on emerging categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were five (5) themes which emerged from the reading respond journals: developing new ideas and concepts, building in-depth comprehension, discovery of new insights, changing thinking perspective, and gaining learning opportunity.

Firstly, it is found that four (4) out of twelve (12) participants were able to develop new ideas and concepts. One of the participants, Participant 1 (P1) illustrated it in her journal as follows:

After understanding both articles, there are parts of the article that I can use to create new concepts and ideas in a way that the deaths that's happened are because their own self. (P1)

P1, in the third reading response journal, stated that after reading her two hand-picked additional articles (*Don't Blame FMFA Organizer* and *Khairy: Concert bans won't solve drug problem*) which reflected on the 3rd article '*Fun, with discipline*', she found that the death of the six Future Music Festival Asia (FMFA) concertgoers were at their own expense. According to P1 "*This helps create a new concept in a way that the deaths that happened are because their own self.*" P1 was

able to generate a new insight after synthesizing and analysing the information she gained from the ER materials.

Besides developing new ideas, it is also found that ER helped the participants to grasp a better understanding of the issues discussed in the assigned texts. Participant 4 (P4), for example, described that the information she gained from the reading was useful to build a deeper understanding of the case. In her transcription, P4 described the reason why the concertgoers abused the drug (Article 3: *Fun, with discipline*) which was as an aid to have fun. P4 managed to develop such detailed understanding due to the information presented in the two ER materials which were '6 Dead from drug abuse at FMFA' and 'Three NGOs lodge police report against FMFA organizer'. These two ER materials exposed rich information to P4 that she was able to grasp a comprehensive understanding of the case.

Based on the findings, our participants reported that they experienced new insights of the topic. Participant 8 (P8) in his second reading response journal stated that he found a new insight from the ER materials. P8 justified the wisdom by providing his own description and supporting citation from the two additional articles he read. P8 also cited a third source to support his new finding.

Next, eight participants reported in their reading response journal that ER changed the way they view the articles' topic. For example, prior to ER, P2 and P5 had formed a belief about the topic of the article. But after conducting ER, P2 and P5 re-considered their thought and had a change of perspective due to the argument and information presented in the ER materials.

Finally, in the second reading response journal, P5 together with P1, P2, P6, P7 and P9 reported that they gained learning opportunity from reading the ER materials. All of the participants stated that they would lose an opportunity to learn something if they did not read the ER materials.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study implicates that if teachers were to regularly use ER, they would enable the students to spend a focused time on the reading. It could help the students to develop their background knowledge regularly and consistently. The study suggests there is a need for teachers to provide scheduled ER session in the daily class hour. ER could also be part of the curriculum for any tertiary level of studies so that students would always present credible information, facts or ideas in their group presentation. In the light of the implementation, one of Day and Bamford's top ten principles in teaching ER is the teacher is a role model to the students (2002). The teacher himself/herself should be a reader which can set an example to the students. Otherwise, the students won't exert their effort to the reading (Mohd Asraf & Ahmad, 2003).

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