



A teaching-Learning experience on Reading to University Students

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Abstract

LEXCIT (www.lectura.cat) is a Programme whose aim is to improve the reading and comprehension of written texts and whose objective is education success in the global sense of the word. This is a project promoted by “la Caixa”, the Education Department of the Generalitat de Catalunya and the Jaume Bofill Foundation. Its ultimate aim is to improve the academic results of primary school pupils, especially their reading competence, through the involvement of the whole community inside and outside the school.

LEXCIT starts from the premise that practising reading and text comprehension enables students to better understand what they read and to progress in their remaining subjects. Dialoguing about what has been read, the pupil will develop her own comprehension strategies. At the same time, the whole student community needs to be involved by making their community participants of what takes place in the school. The volunteer will become for the student a person with whom spend a good time reading. Volunteers are paramount for the development of the project. At the Education Science Faculty (Language and Literature Development Area) at University of Lleida, we work a basic competence with our students: how to teach reading and understand what Primary school pupils understand. To this end, we got in touch with the LEXCIT Programme in the academic year 2011-2012 so that our teacher-students applied the theoretical concepts related to teaching the reading linguistic skill that they had worked on at university.

We held meetings with our Degree voluntary students working within the LEXCIT programme in order to assess aspects of their pedagogical experience with Service-learning project. Service-Learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. Among the ideas that came up in these encounters, we would like to highlight the following: firstly, they observed a change in attitude towards reading from those students who previously presented problems in the development of this linguistic skill and an increase in their self-esteem when reading texts adequate to their learning ability and the reinforcement of their confidence results in higher fluency in their reading and an improvement of their text comprehension. Secondly, our university students reaffirm that not only is reading a source of pleasure and entertainment, as sustained by traditional teaching institutions, but reading is also a linguistic skill that encourages people to converse, write, discover, give meaning, deal with our own experiences and, all in all, to be.

To sum up, this is a new pedagogical project that from a social perspective (volunteer work) and educational perspective (teachers) intends to increase pupil's reading ability as a fundamental tool to improve social and school results.

1. What is LEXCIT? A program for the development of Reading skills

LEXCIT (www.lectura.cat) is a programme to improve the reading skills and the reading comprehension of mainly written texts and whose aim is educational success in the global sense of this concept. It is an initiative promoted by “Fundació la Caixa”, the Department of Education of the Generalitat de Catalunya and the Foundation Jaume Bofill. Its ultimate goal is to improve the Academic performance of Primary School Students, especially their reading skills, by involving both the entire school and non-school community. In Catalonia, approximately one in five primary School children has a low reading comprehension level (a 22% according to the Generalitat basic skills level tests and a 14% according to PISA 2009). Different studies have shown that difficulties in reading comprehension may hinder learning in all subjects, thus causing discouragement and dropout (González Portal, 2000).

LEXCIT starts from the premise that if students practice reading and text comprehension they will be able to better understand what they read and thus, progress in all subjects. By means of talking about what has been read, the learner will develop her own reading comprehension strategies. At the same



time, we want to involve the entire community in the education of students, by involving everyone in the community in what happens at School. The volunteer will be a referent for this student, a trustworthy person with whom to enjoy a good reading time.

The task of the volunteers is central to the development of the program. LEXCIT would not exist without the participation of volunteers who have the time to go to schools where the program is being developed. From the Faculty of Educational Sciences (Area of Teaching Language and Literature) from the University of Lleida, we work a basic competency with our Primary Degree Teacher Trainees in the subject called Learning and Teaching Languages, taught in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Year Degree of Primary Education Teaching Studies: how to teach reading and understanding what primary school students aged between 6 and 12 years old read. In this sense, from the 2011-2012 academic year, we got in touch with the LEXCIT Program so that our University students could put into practice the theoretical concepts related to reading and the teaching of this linguistic ability in real educational settings.

Once these contacts were established, a training session was conducted at our Faculty in order to train the students who volunteered to be comprehensive reading referents in different schools of the city of Lleida where the program LEXCIT was implemented. Specifically, we are talking about the Santa Maria de Gardeny and Joan XXIII estate schools.

Student training by LEXCIT experts covered the following four main areas:

- Learning to teach reading to develop good reading comprehension levels, as we will be specified in the next section of this paper, and some hints about how to structure the reading sessions.
- The role of mentor, that is to say, a set of guidelines on the relationship with the child. It is a matter of being a referent of readership and confidence so as to develop proper reading comprehension strategies.
- Proposed activities will have to be tailored to the interests of the child, but they could be especially of interest during the first sessions when there is not confidence enough between the child with reading difficulties and the volunteer.
- Selection of fiction materials and knowledge aimed at students of grade 4 at primary school. These activities were developed by Amalia Ramoneda Rimbau in the Library of the Teacher Association Rosa Sensat.

Once the training was over, our primary school level volunteer- university-students were sent to the aforementioned schools an average of two hours a week after school. The reading related activities that they carried out are detailed below:

- Individual tutorials between volunteers and children, i.e. spaces for reading and conversation that improve reading ability.
- Group activities: reading related dynamics where teamwork and shared learning is key.
- School activities: it raises a dynamic relationship with schools to create educational ties and enhance student learning in this area.
- Activities with families: participation in workshops and reading aloud sessions where they receive support materials.

2. The service-learning methodology: what it is

Service-learning is a teaching methodology that combines the academic curriculum with community service. As a teaching methodology, it falls under the experiential education philosophy. It specifically integrates community service with education and self-knowledge as a way to enrich the learning experience, teach civic values, encourage social involvement throughout life, and strengthen the common good of communities.

Service-learning combines the benefits of experiential learning and community service. It is a teaching and learning methodology that promotes the following actions:

- Curriculum connections: Students learn and mature. Integrating learning in a service project is key to the success of service-learning. The academic links (with the curriculum) should be clear and built on existing skills of the specific discipline.
- Student participation: In addition to being actively involved in the project itself, students have the opportunity to select, design, implement and evaluate their service activity.



- Reflection: Structured opportunities are created in order to think, talk and write about the service experience. The balance between reflection and action allows students to be aware at all times of the impact of their work.
- Community partnership: The partnership of the school with social agents allows to identify real needs, provides guidance and the means for project success. In a successful partnership, both sides must contribute to and benefit from the project. To carry this out, clear guidelines must be provided, for example on the frequency with which a student is involved in the service of a specific community organization.
- True community needs: Service learning serves community needs. Members of the local community or service recipients are involved in determining the relevance and depth of social activities.
- Civic responsibility: It helps to develop the civic responsibility of the participants.
- Evaluation: Having well-structured assessment instruments with constructive feedback through reflection, provides valuable information about the positive results of mutual learning and of the service to facilitate the sustainability and replication of the experience.

Briefly, Service-Learning is a method to bond social commitment with knowledge, skills and attitudes learning. Learning to be competent to be helpful to others.

3. Reading strategies promoted by the LECXIT Program

When we talk about reading strategies, we refer to the merging of techniques, methods, procedures and resources that are used to regulate the reading activity of students and that make it possible to select, evaluate, persist, modify or abandon certain actions to be able to achieve the goal or the proposed objective. In this way, the teaching-learning process is more fruitful and effective. A good reading teaching technique takes into consideration the interests and motivations of students, the use of adequate resources to the reality of the learning situation and that, moreover, is able to adapt to different situations because it is not subject exclusively to a type of content or text.

The strategies that should be implemented in programs to promote reading comprehension skills must allow planning the overall reading task and its emplacement, motivation and availability in relation to the abovementioned reading skills. This will facilitate testing, revising and control of what is read and proper decision-taking in light of the pursued objective. Thus, the program LECXIT allows for strategies that make it possible to:

- Understand the explicit and implicit reading purposes;
- Activate prior knowledge related to the content of the text;
- Draw attention to what is essential to the detriment of what may seem trivial;
- To continuously check in understanding occurs through periodic review, recapitulation and self-questioning;
- Evaluating the internal consistency of the content of the text that the text expresses and its compatibility with the previous knowledge that the reader has about it;
- To elaborate various kinds of hypothesis, interpretations and conclusions about what is being read.

Having seen the strategies, what types of texts do our volunteering LECXIT students use? There is no pre-established type of text, but depending on the academic courses they are assigned they will make use of a different type of textual discourse appropriate to the age of the students. Needless to say, since the program LECXIT is promoted in the Autonomous Community of Catalonia, both Spanish and Catalan texts are used, even if we will only quote texts in Spanish.

4. First results

The experience of LECXIT program as an initiative to improve the reading and comprehension of texts and now have a set of indicators that show that this is an educational initiative that offers short-term positive results. The ones we offer are the result of surveys conducted among LECXIT volunteers, tutoring teachers from the above mentioned schools and the families of the students with reading difficulties. These surveys were conducted at the end of the school year 2011-2012. The results obtained and given to us by the Jaume Bofill foundation are the following:



Increased interest and motivation towards reading	31%
Improvement in Reading comprehension	25%
Improvement in Reading fluency	25%
Overall improvement	6%
It cannot be valued at present	6%
Increase in library use	3%
No change	3%

Table 1 Evolution of reading comprehension according to tutors

Moreover, 91 % of tutors have confirmed an improvement in the Reading practices of students with reading difficulties.

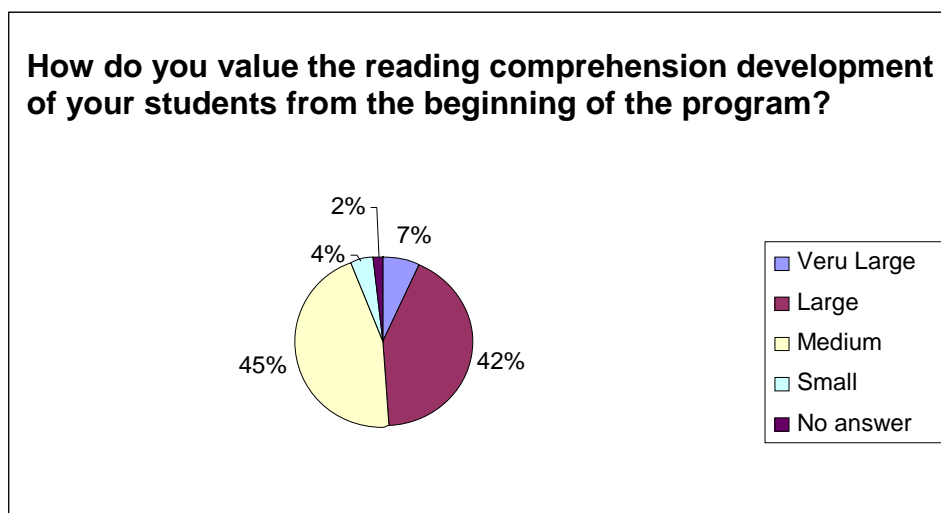


Table 2 Evolution of reading comprehension according to the LECXIT volunteers

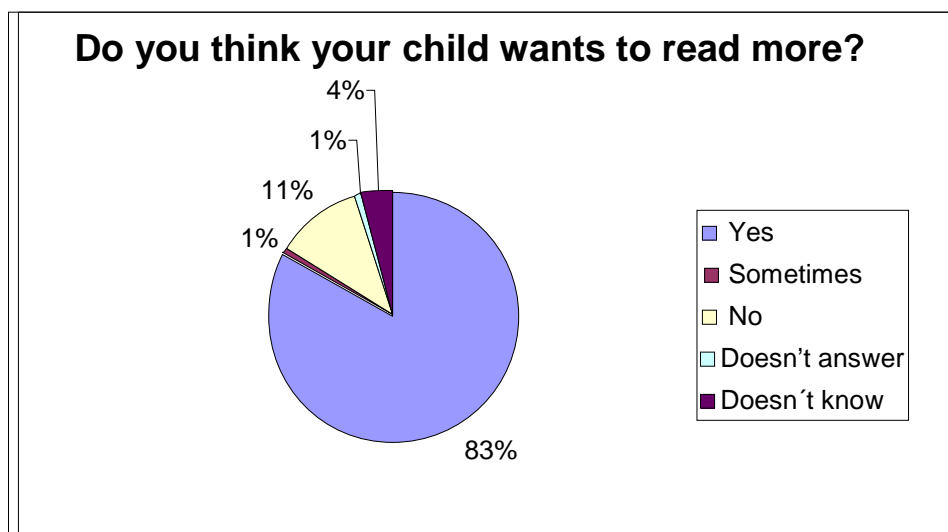


Table 3 Evolution of reading comprehension according to families



Furthermore, 85% of families consider that their offspring are more willing to read and 94% that they read better.

5. Conclusions

With our Degree volunteer students of LECXIT program, we had a set of encounters with the aim of evaluating three aspects: firstly, the pedagogic experience obtained with the reading, secondly, the reading competency concepts from the practice of schools and finally, what reading strategies were more satisfactory in the process of teaching reading skills. From all the ideas that came up during these encounters we want to highlight the following:

- In the first place, we appreciated a change of attitude towards reading in those students that showed problems in the development of this linguistic ability. It is worth mentioning an improvement in self-esteem in reading texts at their learning level and the acquisition of self-reliance that, consequently, facilitates a higher degree of fluency in reading and a better understanding of texts.
- In the second place, our university volunteer students state that reading is not only a source of pleasure and entertainment as it has always been the case in traditional schools, but that reading is a linguistic ability that lead us to talk, create social bonds, write, discover, provide meaning and transform information, to cultivate engaged citizens, to manage our own experiences and, ultimately, to be.
- In the third place, reading skills is not an ability that is uniquely and exclusively acquired during the first years of schooling: the reading competency is understood as a set of skills, knowledge and strategies that each individual constructs along one's life, indifferent contexts, through interaction with the environment and the communities where she participates.
- In this sense, reading competence amounts to being able to understand and use written texts, reflect and engage in them and reach, in this way, the proper reading aims that will lead to the knowledge and use of the text.

References

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