



Students as Experts and the End Result of SSR Performance in an ESP Course for Psychology

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Abstract

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) during the English for Specific Purposes course (ESP) is a suitable activity for the students in Psychology as it improves their reading skills, vocabulary and critical thinking. Moreover, setting up a digital space for our students provides easy access to resources, but also to other learners, creating a networked community in which the level of informality makes them feel comfortable. As such, organising analogue and digital projects as follow-up activities of SSR contribute to building a database of specialized terminology for the ESP under focus and to the formation of a learning community that lasts over time and may provide important resources for the language course. This study analyses the students' performance and feedback at the end of one academic year, giving us insight into our students' engagement in reading activities (stative activity) and follow-up activities (dynamic projects) in which they contribute with information extracted from the texts read during SSR.

Keywords: *sustained silent reading, ESP course, specialised terms.*

Introduction

The online and offline learning patterns of behaviour are intertwined for the new generations as they grew with new technologies, but at the same time, they still have around them non-digital theories and practices. Nonetheless, activities which require higher attention-span and undivided attention tend to be replaced in the digital age by activities which involve play, interactivity, speed, collaboration and hyperconnection. Sustained silent reading (SSR) is one such activity which tends to be less popular among our students. As we consider reading to be beneficial for the development of vocabulary, critical thinking ability and cognitive skills (reasoning and problem solving, memory and social cognition), we inserted the SSR programme and SSR follow-up mini-projects in our classes, aiming at striking a balance between the online and offline teaching activities and helping our students acquire English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in an efficient, pleasant and up-to-date manner.

1. Management of SSR during ESP. Theoretical background

Sustained Silent Reading is defined as a programme which involves a period of uninterrupted silent reading for roughly 15 minutes during classroom time. It means reading for pleasure and usually the materials are selected by the learners themselves, the final aim being that of improving students' reading habits, performance and interests. There have been many SSR programmes and all of them stress the importance of doing the activity individually, silently, uninterruptedly and for pleasure (for a detailed list of these programmes, see Siah and Kwok, 2010: 169). During the English for Psychology course, we reinvented SSR to suit the purposes of the course. Hence, it involves specialised literature in English, indicated by the language instructor or chosen by the students themselves, as in the ESP class students are the content-experts (see Cotoc, 2019b: 382). Moreover, in the case of ESP, students participating in SSR find out information that is relevant to them and this causes L2 language development and implicit acquisition of specialised content. SSR engages the language instructor and the students in a process of discovery of new terminology and ongoing negotiation.

Speed reading and SSR are components of reading comprehension skills and they are essential for meeting the needs of everyday personal and professional life (see Alharbi, 2015). As hyperconnection, interactivity, speed and digital screens are characteristic for today's warp-speed world, the practice of speed reading is the most used one as people had to adapt to the new situational contexts brought about by the new technologies. As such, university students, who are supposed to be expert readers, not only do they read the online digital text differently than the printed content (see Cull, 2011), but their reading behaviour also has changed entirely. They scan and skim content, in search for specific information, and tend to lose the practice of reading for pleasure in a slow manner, which is also a necessary component as it develops skills and abilities that speed reading doesn't cover to the same extent: critical thinking and deep analysis. Due to these factors, we



embarked on an SSR academic programme during ESP as reading comprehension is tested anyways in any ESP class. What is more, through SSR texts, we practiced both slow reading and speed reading with our students. The reading for pleasure component was inserted at the beginning of each ESP class and the speed reading was required in various follow-up mini-projects, involving techniques like SST (skimming and scanning techniques), scanning involving reading for detail and skimming concerning taking the most important information and the main idea rather than reading all of the words (Yusuf et al., 2017: 47). Another technique that we used was meta guiding / guiding your eyes technique. For example: the double like sweep (taking in two lines at a time), the variable sweep (taking in as many lines as the reader can), backward reading (using the backward sweep of your eyes to take in information) (see Buzan, 2004: 92-97).

2. Educational Context and Target Group

We focused on SSR during the ESP classes at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. At our university, at most faculties, students follow a compulsory course of language for specific purposes in the first year, for two semesters, for a teaching load of 2 hours every week. At the end of the academic year, students have to pass the Test of Linguistic Competence which comprises of four parts: speaking, reading, listening and writing) and they have to reach the global level B1 in order to graduate and B2 in order to enrol at a master programme. Students who have a language certificate can validate the course in the second semester. The vast majority of the students choose English over the other language courses available (French, German, Italian, Russian or Spanish). At the Faculty under focus most of the bibliography is in English and, for this reason, we considered that SSR is of interest to them, helping them with all the other content-subjects.

3. Presentation of the SSR Project

We integrated SSR for two years in a row in our language for specific purposes classes at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. We started in the first semester of the academic year 2017-2018 with a collaborative pilot project involving students in Psychology, Early Education Study, Pedagogy and the students at the Faculty of European Studies (see Cotoc and Nistor, 2018). We implemented the programme also with the students who studied French for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (all fields), in the second semester of 2018 (see Cotoc, 2019a) and we ran the programme for the entire academic year 2018-2019 (for details about the first semester see the case study in Cotoc, 2019b).

This paper analyses the students' performance and feedback in the second semester of 2019, giving us insight into our students' engagement in reading activities (stative activity). It also presents the results of the follow-up activities (dynamic projects) in which students contributed with information extracted from the SSR texts during the entire academic year.

The SSR took place for 10 minutes at the beginning of the English class with all the students for the entire second semester of the academic year 2018-2019. The students in the English class performed this activity in the first semester as well in the exact manner: all the students received the texts in advance and they brought the texts printed out, but they were also allowed to read them on their smartphone devices. However, they were highly advised to perform the activity in the analogue manner, with pen and paper so that they could underline important ideas and concepts and write down notes/comments/ideas alongside the text. The texts were connected to the topic discussed in every course unit, they were very diverse, ranging from scientific articles to blogs posts and they were longer text meant to be finished at home and not in the classroom.

3.1 Digital learning community and group sourcing

In 2017, we set up a digital space for our students: a secret Facebook group: *EAP_English for Psychology*. This group is meant to last over time and every year a new generation of students joins so that we form a learning community in which students are treated not only as ESP learners, but also as Psychology experts. The communication in this group is informal, it takes place only in English and it can involve posts related to the English Course, but also related to Psychology in general, providing a digital space in which our students can find useful information, but also seek help for various projects and collaborate with their peers. We also used this group to hyperlink a folder in the google drive which contained the content necessary for the course and the texts used during SSR.

In the academic year 2018-2019, SSR had a digital follow-up activity as students had the mini-task to fill in a survey in which they were asked to provide feedback on the SSR activity and to write down 3 concepts from the SSR texts and 3 concepts that they encountered in other courses, providing



a definition, example and translation in Romanian for each. In this way, we used the technique of group sourcing, “a social learning transmission model that integrates peers’ production and feedback” (see Moccozet and Tardy, 2014) and we managed to collect Psychology-related concepts and work on the creation of an open-source database useful for any student in the first year at the Faculty of Psychology.

3.2 The end result of SSR programme: collection of specialised terms

The follow-up activities (dynamic projects) of the SSR requiring students to contribute with information extracted from the texts read during SSR represent the end result of the SSR programme: the collection of concepts related to Psychology. This offered us a valuable resource for the ESP class as it indicates the most prevalent concepts and the most frequent mistakes made by the students depending on their language level. We use it as teaching material as well. As such, using the database of specialised terminology, students select the best definitions and examples, provide corrections for typos, grammar and spelling mistakes and offer alternatives. As Psychology is an interdisciplinary study, students debate whether they would include some concepts and exclude others and give reasons why. They identify plagiarism, incorrect citation of sources, analyse their own and their colleagues’ work from the instructor’s perspective, thus constructing a useful feedback and constituting an efficient reinforcement exercise.

The database has also provided content for further projects for the students: data cleaning, eliminating overlaps, preserving the best definitions and translations, and, in the end, constructing an online database of concepts useful in Psychology. Currently, working with a group of 4 students, after eliminating all the overlaps, our database contains the entries provided in the mini-projects from the first semester, consisting of 357 concepts to which we still have to add the concepts from the second semester. For every concept, we aim at introducing a definition, example, translation in Romanian and a multimedia element.

We provide an example of entry submitted by an advanced student. The content is authentic, without any correction. The requirement was to write 3 specialised concepts/words/phrases from their silent reading activity, providing a definition, an example and a translation for each of them.

“1. Sexual dimorphism. It refers to the condition where the two sexes of the same species exhibit different characteristics beyond the differences in their sexual organs. The condition occurs in many animals and some plants. Example: So the cool thing about the Hercules beetle is that it’s sexually dimorphic. Translation: dimorfism sexual.

2. Social cognition. It refers to a growing area of social psychology that studies how people perceive, think about, and remember information about others. Example: This is just a basic aspect of human social cognition. Translation: *cogniție socială*

3. Self-serving bias. It refers to the tendency to attribute dispositional causes for successes, and situational causes for failure, particularly when self-esteem is threatened. Example: Overall, research on the self-serving bias and depression suggests that the bias isn’t completely flipped in people with depression, but the magnitude of the bias is less than in the general population - it’s smaller. Translation: *egocentrism biasat.*”

4. SSR Results and Discussion

The SSR survey at the end of the academic year 2018-2019 was applied to 64 respondents, 51 females and 13 males, 57 intermediate level and 7 advanced level, age 19-20. The survey is two-folded, offering the language instructor the students’ feedback on SSR and also containing information extracted by the students from the SSR texts. On the one hand, the results in the second semester were similar to the first semester, confirming that the programme is useful, efficient and pleasant for the ESP class even for two semesters in a row. Moreover, the items of the survey meant to assess SSR were applied in the previous academic year during both the English for Specific Purposes class and the French for Specific Purposes class and the results show congruence with our two previous studies (see Cotoc and Nistor, 2018, Cotoc 2019a).

The first three questions revealed students’ enthusiasm for SSR, their engagement in the classroom and at home. When asked if they enjoyed the activity, 86% of students declared that they liked it, and the rest of them declared that it was both a pleasure and a burden. When asked to what extent they engaged in SSR during classroom time, 20 students declared average participation and 39 declared strong and full engagement. However, not all of them continued the SSR activity at home when they didn’t finish it in class: 12 students never continued it, 20 of them sometimes continued reading at home, 20 students often continued the SSR. Only 11 of them declared that they very often continued the programme and only 1 always finished the texts at home.



Questions 4-8 confirm that SSR is useful for specialised vocabulary acquisition. As such, 25 students declared that the texts were average in terms of vocabulary, 29 found them not difficult and only 10 declared that they were a bit difficult. The encouraging fact is that 63 students said that they learned new vocabulary during SSR, the vast majority of them also looking up unknown words and trying to use them in context afterwards. Overall, students found the activity useful and very useful for vocabulary acquisition.

Questions 9-13 addressed the content of the SSR texts and the results are similar to results about the vocabulary acquisition, showing that students acquired specialised content and that they were interested in the specialised content addressed. As the SSR texts are connected to the topics addressed at the ESP course, the survey validated the choice of content for our entire course.

Questions 14-15 constituted the collection of concepts that were meant to be included in the collection of concepts from the first semester, representing the continuation of the ongoing project of group sourcing with the final aim of making available an online database of useful concepts in Psychology. These questions also show our intention to build the database in a collaborative manner, but not to produce a final product, but rather an ever-changing one, depending on the *status quo* of the field and the community of (future) experts.

Question 16 was another open question in which the students had to write 2 new ideas/ items of knowledge they acquired during SSR. This question gave the language instructor an insight into the kind of information that draws the students' attention and what they already know as first year students, especially because many of them used lexical devices like: *Until now I did not know that ...; I was fascinated about ...; I learned ...; An idea that I found quite interesting was ...; Another piece of information that took me by surprise was that ...*

The students' likes and dislikes are addressed in questions 17 and 18. They liked the programme, the topics and the diversity of the texts, the individual work implied and the fact that it helped them improve their vocabulary. In terms of dislikes, 22 students complained that the time allocated to SSR was too short and 7 of them that the texts were too long. However, our aim was to use SSR to introduce them into ESP atmosphere and the topic addressed in every course and not to finish the activity in the classroom. Moreover, the texts were longer so that the SSR was part of their homework.

A hierarchy of the factors enumerated in question 19 of the survey in *checkboxes* format with an 'add option' element showed us what motivated most our students to read the texts: 1. *The texts were directly related to my field of studies*, 2. *The texts were up to date*, 3. *This activity is compulsory (1 point in the section Reading Comprehension + Use of English in the Test of Linguistic Competence)*, 4. *These texts would be included in the useful bibliography for the exam*. Their choice shows us that their motivation to perform SSR was primarily intrinsic, denoting interest, enjoyment and inherent satisfaction (see Legault, 2016).

Our students' attitude towards SSR was mainly favourable, on a scale from 1 (unfavourable) to 5 (favourable), all of them selecting 3-5: 3 (13 students), 4 (33 students) and 5 (18 students). Most of them declared a favourable attitude towards reading in their native tongue (49 students), 11 students showing a neutre attitude, and 4 of them expressing an unfavourable attitude. Using the same scale, their attitude towards reading in English ranged from 3 to 5: 3 (12 students), 4 (23 students) and 5 (29 students).

The fact that the digital environment has shaped our students' preferences is reflected in their ever-increasing interest in multimodal, interactive and hyperlinked content in the format of a teaser, not requiring in-depth analysis. This is shown by the last question analysed in this study: *If you could have engaged in any other activity for 10 minutes at the beginning of each English course, what would you have chosen?* Unsurprisingly, the preferred answers were 'watching a (short) video/film' and 'playing (grammar/vocabulary) games'. One student even stated the following: "I think that it would be better if the SSR activity was a summary, like the movie trailers we watch, so that it stimulates our desire to read the whole text". Nonetheless, we consider this finding in favour of our SSR programme as it highlights the fact that many of our students have stopped engaging in slow reading and reading for pleasure on their own and, as a result, they would not benefit from the skills and abilities developed by it.

Relating to the use of Facebook for classroom communication with peers and with the language instructor and for hyperlinking classroom content and SSR texts, most of our students found the platform extremely useful (54 students), very useful (9 students) and useful (1 student). They also found useful that they could use their smartphones during classroom time, for class purposes, 48 students considering this was very useful and extremely useful, 7 students acknowledging an average usefulness, 9 saying that Facebook was not particularly useful.



5. Conclusions

The SSR programme combined with the follow-up mini-projects of contributing to and building an online database of specialized terms for Psychology constitute up-to-date teaching and learning activities which are valuable for the ESP class as they develop our students' critical thinking and language skills. At the same time, the SSR texts and the database, which is a work in progress at this point, constitute reusable content which is subject to change and improvement as they are students-oriented and dependent, offering our students the role of experts and ensuring a collaborative and encouraging classroom atmosphere. Moreover, the digital environment of a social network site has proved useful in building and maintaining a community of ESP learners and (future) content-experts and in promoting peer collaboration for various projects.

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