



Enhancing Language Learners' Reading Skills through Multimodal Evaluations of Traditional Reading Books. Insights from a Maltese Research Venture

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Abstract

Language teachers frequently voice out that they feel unprepared when teaching reading-related activities in class, through which they can enhance their students' reading skills [1]. A common feeling shared by teachers and students alike is one viewing reading-related tasks as boring, repetitive and tedious [2]. Therefore, while teachers wish to motivate students and continuously aim to put them at the centre of the reading activity, a common occurrence is that teachers end up feeling they lost a battle since notwithstanding all the teachers' good will and intentions, students still eventually feel detached from what is being taught in class [3]. In this light, this paper intends to contribute to the field of research and presents the insights obtained from a two-year research venture involving three schools in Malta. The research venture started by receiving feedback from language teachers and their students about how they feel when obliged to teach and learn reading during their language lessons. The input was evaluated using thematic analysis [4] and results indicated that the interviewed teachers and their students did experience the abovementioned challenging situation, highlighted by literature, each time they had to teach reading-related skills. As a proactive reaction to this, adopting multimodal trends and techniques [5], the paper will present (tried and tested) suggestions for teachers to feel more prepared and effective when putting students at the centre during reading lessons. The shared examples will be taken from a research venture where, together with the participating teachers and their language students, a traditional (non-modern) Maltese book written in 1986 [6] was transformed into a motivating multimodal reading text. In conclusion, the paper suggests that to achieve this, what helps is predominantly focusing on the likes and dislikes of the readers (i.e. the students in the class). With this teachers need to keep the linguistic level of the target audience in mind and design activities permitting students to involve themselves in task-based reading activities. These activities should be based on initiatives where students feel encouraged to express their reactions through their favourite (frequently nonlinguistic) modes. These may include visuals, dance, songs, drama, clothes and colours [7]. The road is winding... but the destination is reachable.

Keywords: Reading skills, Traditional reading books, Multimodality, Pedagogical resources, Student-centred teaching and learning

1. Introduction: Students and Reading

The widespread perception is that today adolescents and children do not read [8]. Compared to previous generations, the younger generation does not read books [9]. Even though the choice of books for children gets wider over time, it is still almost an uphill struggle to convince the younger generation that it is their right to read [10]. Reading of books unfortunately seems to be confined only within the four classroom walls. Within the language classroom, teachers use books - specifically textbooks - when teaching the four language skills [11].

Pachler [12] distinguishes between the teaching of productive skills i.e. writing and speaking and the teaching of the receptive skills, namely listening and reading. This distinction, however, could lead to a misunderstanding that views reading as a receptive skill, thus implying that students learning the language are expected to only passively read what is being presented and stop at such an inactive level. Because of this, language teachers constantly experience situations where students instead of digging deeper into the text and reading actively throughout the set pre- and post-reading activities [13], the readers end up reporting a lack of inactivity and boredom [2], eventually ending up hating reading and therefore struggle to improve their reading skills [14].



The situation gets more complicated because when teachers try to find reasons for this unwanted yet common reality, they tend to suggest that both during their teaching training programmes and also during their Continuous Professional Development programmes, when compared to the information and practice they got linked to the teaching of other skills such as writing, they get very limited training about the teaching of reading skills [1].

Due to this lack of training, many have tried to contribute, advising teachers about what can help them be effective while teaching reading skills. A crucial part of the success of the teacher is determined by the resources used to enhance student learning [15]. These reading-related resources include (but not exclusively) traditional authored books and pedagogical textbooks. However, with these, in the contemporary language classroom, there are modern reading textbooks which range from paper-based books to other less traditional reading books such as E-Books and others which include ICT-related materials such as videos and audio-visually accompanying the main text [16].

Allen [17] suggests that while teachers should be encouraged to choose wisely when opting for these books through which to teach reading, this wisdom implies that the use of pedagogical reading books should eventually lead to help students feel that their learning journey is a meaningful and memorable one. Due to the vast variety of books available, also keeping in mind the other resources teachers themselves can produce which do not include books, Gubbles et al [18] suggest that teachers should use these resources in a moderate, balanced yet varied way. Likewise, Pressley et al [19] elaborate that this balance is reached when (and only if) teachers use reading-related texts which respect both the linguistic level of their target audience, as well as the topics students like or dislike.

2. Setting the Research Questions: A Contribution to the Field.

These suggestions, at first, may seem rather idealistic and overambitious. However, aiming to contribute to the field of research, the author opted to refrain from stopping at a level based on judgmental feelings or conjectures, and instead seek ways to understand and evaluate whether these are reachable targets or just desired dreams. This is what led the author of this paper to initiate a two-year empirical research venture with two main pertinent research questions:

1. How do language students and their teachers react when asked to read a traditional reading book?
2. Based on the outcomes of the first research question, which suggestions do students themselves formulate through which traditional books might be transformed into an effective student-friendly reading pedagogical aid?

3. Methodology

Seeking to obtain comprehensive answers to the abovementioned questions, the study opted for qualitative research tools. First, adopting purposeful sampling [20] the book *Il-ktieb tal-Fenek l-Aħmar* [6] was selected as the text presented to the teachers and their students. The choice of the book was determined by the date of publication (1986 i.e. 36 years before being used by students in class). After obtaining all the necessary ethical research permissions, once again adopting purposeful sampling [20] the study worked with one mixed ability classroom from three schools situated in areas with less academic reputation.

The data collection exercise first started with a semi-structured interview where each teacher of the class shared their views about their experiences (including the challenges and difficulties) while teaching reading skills to the particular class. Teachers also shared their experiences about how they prepare their resources while teaching reading and whether they would use the *Il-ktieb tal-Fenek l-Aħmar* or not as a teaching tool.

After this, field notes were collected from classroom observations where students were taking part in three hands-on activities related to the book. During each activity, students were asked to react and share their views about the book and its contents. These activities were based on qualitative data collection techniques specifically designed to collect data from adolescent respondents [21].



Once all the data was collected, interviews and fieldnotes were transcribed and data was analysed using thematic analysis [22] and multimodal discourse analysis [23].

4. Results: Answering the First Research Question

The three teachers taking part in the interview all voiced out that for them teaching reading is not an easy task. A shared feeling among all teachers was that teaching reading requires preparing a wide range of resources. Teachers were concerned that since students in the same classroom have mixed abilities, it is not always easy to find texts which level-wise and content-wise are appropriate for all the students in class.

Moreover, the teachers agreed that the book *Il-ktieb tal-fenek l-aħmar* was not appropriate for the classroom. Put in one of the teacher's words: 'It is old fashioned since then spelling rules have changed and I am sure that students will be put off by its contents and the way the text is set' [Teacher 2: interview excerpt]. Therefore, on a similar note to what was shared in the literature review section above [8, 9, 11], teachers argued that they prefer refraining from using this book and instead find different resources which in their view are more modern and more student friendly.

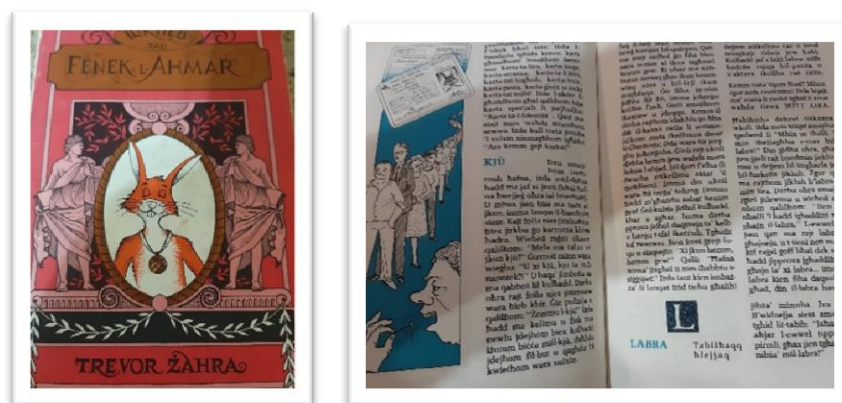


Fig. 1. The front cover and the content of the selected book *Il-fenek l-aħmar* penned by Trevor Żahra

A comparison of this general feeling shared by the teachers to what students shared, on the other hand, manifests that students had a predominantly different view. While agreeing that a book published almost 40 years before required revisions, students still viewed this book as valid. An analysis of the words of students - when compared to what the teachers suggested - indicates that the students had a wider definition of *text*, which resonates with Kress' distinction between two types of texts [24]. Teachers tended to view the book as a text that fix reading paths, while the students viewed the book as a text that allows different reading paths. Whereas the teachers viewed the book as is, thus leaving it as originally created by the author, the students were more willing to look at the book through deeply critical eyes and while pointing out the antiquated parts, they still made efforts to suggest how to change the book according to their liking, thus still willing to read it but with critical eyes.

5. Suggestions: Answering the Second Research Question

The words of the students were complimented by their actions. Their willingness to still use the book, brought a second follow-up question during the hands-on observation sessions, asking students to say which changes they would implement to the book, to make it more reader-friendly, and therefore more adequate to use as a pedagogical tool while teaching reading.

Apart from simply keeping in mind that some of the grammar rules had changed since the book was published as their teachers did (i.e. see result section above), students felt that both where content and where the layout is concerned, the book could be presented in a fresher look. As seen in figure 2



below, students felt that the book should involve fewer words on one page, more target-oriented content with topics which adolescents are more familiar with, a less dense layout, as well as a more colourful and bigger font. In this one could see that the latter qualities are characteristics frequently observed in digital texts, and therefore as Johnson suggests the contemporary digital world is shaping the printed world around us [25].



Fig. 2. Students opted to change the content of the book, the images and also to amend its layout.

This shaping is also seen in the way students suggested that this traditional book lacks a sense of interactivity. Together with the text constituted of written graphics, images and colour (as seen in Figure 2) students suggested that what would make the book more readable and adequate for their age would be a set of interactive exercises such as games linked to the original content of the book. In figure 3 for example students created a crossword related to one of the chapters and another game which presents two images with several differences. The reader is expected to read the text of the book, understand it well and then fill in these games. Therefore, students did not only think of passive reading where the reader 'simply' reads what is written on the page. Instead, their concept of reading adds a sense of interactive reading based on activity and understanding [26].

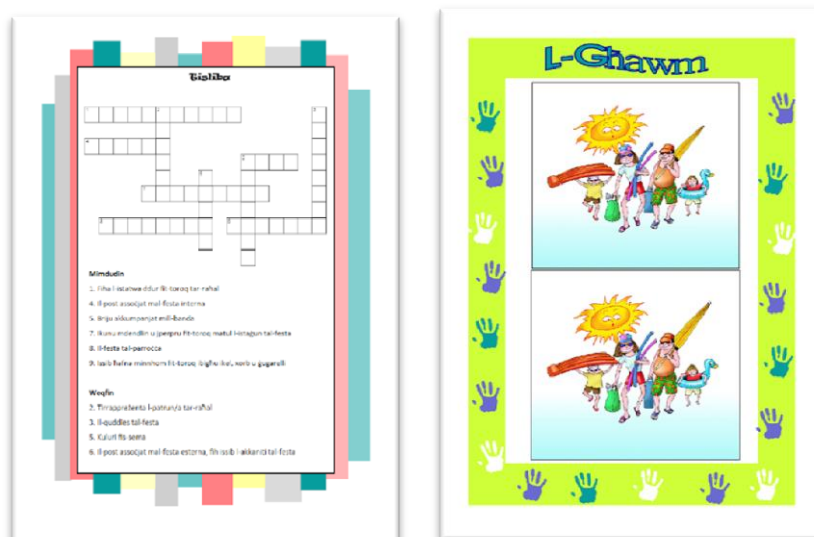


Fig. 3. Students were willing to add the interactivity of the book *Il-fenek l-aħmar* penned by Trevor Żahra.

This sense of interaction with the text while reading tends to be once again ratified through two other qualities which students were willing to add to the original content of the book. The fact that students did not wish to stay passive but to read at deeper levels, was manifested once again when students said they preferred reading texts about real emotions they faced daily. Furthermore, as seen in Figure 4, students also suggested that this should however be done in a balanced way, also including a sense of humour when needed throughout the text [27]. This resonates with the ideas suggesting that



while keeping in mind the linguistic level of the text, the content of books used to teach adolescents reading skills should also create a memorable and pleasurable sense to the young reader [17, 18, 19].

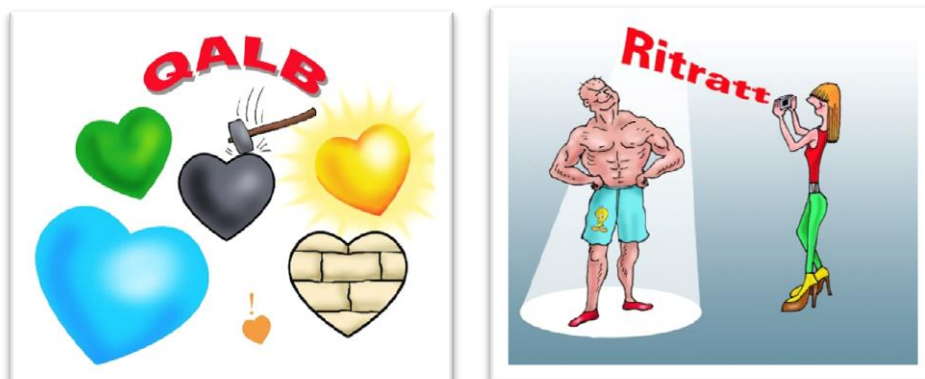


Fig. 4. Students were willing to add colour to most images included in the original book. Furthermore, while they like the way the text focuses on certain emotions they would add more humour to the images included in the *Il-fenek l-aħmar* penned by Trevor Żahra. Throughout the research venture, in collaboration with Trevor Żahra himself, students had the possibility to work on the remaking of the original images. The two images included here are a remake of two of the images in the original book.



Fig. 5. Students gave life to the content of the book. They used clothes, created props and added songs and gestures to the contents of *Il-fenek l-aħmar* penned by Trevor Żahra. Apart from using the book in class, based on these suggestions a theatrical production was produced on the main stage of a national theatre in the capital city of Malta. The students themselves took part in this production which involved reading, singing, dancing and acting. (Source: www.scerriharkins.com)

One final suggestion which students identified as very helpful and motivating while reading a traditional book, is adding props, colours, clothes, gestures, dance and music so that the main text of the book becomes more interactive, appeals to different linguistic levels and attracts the attention of different learning styles and levels [28]. Based on this suggestion, students taking part in this project, after seeking and granting permission from Trevor Żahra himself, with the guidance of their (at first sceptical) teachers and under the direction of the author of this paper, scripted and ended up



producing a two-act theater production based on their reading and interpretation of the original 1986 book. This representation included reading, acting, songs sung by popular well-known Maltese singers, dancing and acting. In Figure 5 above one can also see how – based on students' suggestions and their interpretation of the book they read, students created their own version of the rabbit (i.e. the main protagonist of Zahra's book). This representation was seen by around 2000 people in a jam-packed theater in Valletta (i.e. Malta's capital city).

6. Conclusion: A Long Winding But Reachable Road.

Throughout the process while collecting the suggestions and while working on the theatrical production, the participating teachers themselves were realizing how deep and insightful these student suggestions were.

Right after the theatrical representation of the show, the three teachers involved, while evaluating their initial original and sceptical views, expressed how even though in the following years they will have different student cohorts in their classes, they still intend to refer to these student suggestions each time they (frequently) prepare lessons aimed at teaching reading in class.

As one of the teachers (i.e. teacher 3) wrote in the group chat right after the end of performance night:

This experience has taught us two lessons. First lesson is to give space to students to have their say cos from them we can learn a lot. And second never to judge a book by its cover (and I would add its content)! The road is winding but indeed ...reachable!

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