

**The Effect of Short Story Books on Students' Attitudes and Motivation Toward Reading
Comprehension**

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Abstract

In a public high school in Burkina Faso, English learners showed limited motivation and skill. With the support of school administration and parents, students began reading short stories, completing reading sheets, and presenting information from the stories. For three months, they read a story every two weeks. Data collected from reading sheets, observations of presentations, and student interviews showed that students' attitudes and motivation improved. They were more confident and autonomous, and they participated more actively.

Introduction

Reading is a very important skill in English Language Teaching (ELT). It is part of the receptive skills that the learner needs to develop his/her language. It is difficult and even impossible to succeed in English language learning without developing the skill of reading. However, its acquisition is not without any challenge for learners in general, and those learning in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. As a teacher, I can't deny that I am sometimes confronted with some difficulties when teaching this skill. "[Reading] can be challenging to teach because we can't actually see our students' performance. Listening/reading comprehension occurs inside the learner's mind, and teachers have to depend on some other aspect of students' behavior to make inferences about what they understood" (Sheppard, 2016, 1). If teaching receptive skills is challenging, it is more challenging when students do not show much interest or when the context in which the teacher operates is impacted by factors such as student recruitment and limited language proficiency.

I teach in Burkina Faso, a French speaking country in West Africa where English is taught as a foreign language. It is challenging because learners are discovering a new language that they must learn in addition to the languages they speak already, without any objective goal for most of them. This can result in a poor attitude or low motivation. At the same time, reading is one of the most important skills the students must acquire in order to succeed in English language learning, in placement tests, and in high school or university entrance tests. Reading comprehension is based on literary texts that the students are required to read, understand, and provide the information expected by the teacher. Unfortunately, this does not always occur the way it should. One important thing that caught my attention concerning reading comprehension classes is that most of the students failed to complete the tasks. When participating in class, they

were very slow to react, hesitant and passive. When they were selected to provide their findings, they did not show any motivation. They could hardly provide correct answers because they found the text too difficult to understand.

In Burkina Faso, French is taught as a second language, and teaching French includes reading novels and short stories to help the students develop their vocabulary to better succeed in writing and speaking tasks. This is what inspired and guided my choice to experiment with using short stories in English teaching too. In order to raise students' interest for reading and help them increase their success rate, I introduced activities based on reading short story books. My research question was formulated in this way: ***If I include short story books in my teaching, how will it affect my students' attitudes and motivation toward reading comprehension?*** My hypothesis was that the students would react positively to the newly integrated material, and the students would have a productive reading experience.

Literature Review

Reading in ELT

English language teaching in Burkina Faso resulted from the political ambition to give a chance to students who would like to pursue their studies in the English Department or would need the language for further studies abroad. As Halvorsen (2016) stated, “Many of us have realized that our students today need new sets of skills to prepare them to be successful participants in the globalized society of the future” (1). Indeed, this is why we focus on the four skills: listening, speaking, writing, and reading for communicative purposes on the one hand, and on the other hand to strengthen the students' autonomy in language use in order to conquer their studies and be more competitive in terms of English language use. The communicative skills in

general and reading skills acquisition in particular necessitate enough time for practice. In effect, the amount of time allocated for English language learning depends on the learner's needs. In Burkina Faso, five hours are allocated to the beginners per week and then progressively reduced to two or three hours per week for advanced learners.

Krashen (1989) suggested that comprehensible input would aid language acquisition while incomprehensible input would not. What is it that makes a text difficult to read and understand? Some researchers look at word and sentence length (Wallace, 1992), on the premise that texts with longer sentences and words will be more difficult to understand than those with shorter ones. Others, however, claim that the critical issue is quite simply the number of unfamiliar words which the text contains. So, if readers do not know half the words in a text, they will have great difficulty in understanding the text as the whole. To be successful, they have to recognize a high percentage of the vocabulary without consciously thinking about it (Paran, 1996).

Past Research About Story Books in ELT

Short stories and novels are included in French teaching in Burkina Faso to help the students develop their vocabulary to better succeed in essay writing and other writing and speaking tasks. The selection is made from among local books to better adapt to the students' context. Through reading, the students could find a solution to a particular problem they were going through. The short stories entertain the readers and raise awareness about some social evils that are part of their daily life. So, implementing this in English language teaching will not be unfamiliar to the students. If stories have produced a lot of changes in French learners' attitudes, why should it be different in English?

Extensive reading is a program of reading in which students are generally given short stories or simplified novels. It is often done for pleasure and in a leisurely way, and usually takes

place when the students are on their own. This program is very helpful, for it improves their overall comprehension skills and gives them a wider passive and active vocabulary. “Any classroom will be the poorer for the lack of an extensive reading program, and will be unable to promote its pupils’ language development in all aspects as effectively as if such a program were present” (Davis, 1995, p. 335). Day and Bamford (1998) agree, citing as two of the many goals for extensive reading, enabling students to read without constantly stopping, and providing increased word recognition. What these commentators and others are claiming is that extensive reading is an excellent way for students to develop automaticity (that is the automatic recognition of words when they see them). It can help improve their English reading and writing overall. David (1995) also claims that an extensive reading program will make students more positive about reading.

Student Attitudes and Motivation

Attitudes are beliefs and behaviors towards something. They represent an individual’s state of mind regarding a value and they influence the individual’s thoughts and actions (Wikipedia, 2018). Attitudes have cognitive, behavioral, and affective components (Gan, Humphreys and Lyon, 2004). For ELT, the first component (the cognitive) refers to the beliefs, thoughts and attributes that the learner associates with English language learning, the negative or positive attributes he/she associates with these studies. The second one (the behavioral) refers to the past behaviors or experiences regarding language studies. And the last one (the affective) refers to the feelings or emotions linked to language studies. All these components can deeply influence (positively or negatively) the student’s attitude toward learning, and thus affect language acquisition. This is why Wenden (1991) suggests that attitudes related to students’ evaluations of their own role in learning and their learning ability have a strong effect on their

ability to learn autonomously. Additionally, the psychologist Carl Rogers says that learners need to feel that what they are learning is personally relevant to them, that they have to experience learning (rather than just being taught) and that their self-image needs to be enhanced as part of the process (Rogers 1994). Yet, Bem in his self-perception theory of attitude change (1972) suggests that people infer their attitude from their own behavior much as an outside observer might and are often unaware of attitude changes. Instead, people believe that the views they currently hold are the views they have always held.

Attitudes can also affect the learner's motivation to acquire a language. In fact, motivation is some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do something in order to achieve something. Motivation can be intrinsic (the learner's personal motivations) or extrinsic (external factors) (Ryan & Deci, 2000), so it is not always related to the teacher. Allwright (1977) argued that we cannot be responsible for all of our students' motivation. In the end it is up to them. Further, Williams and Burden (1997) suggest, "Motivation is a state of cognitive arousal which provokes a decision to act as a result of which there is sustained intellectual and/or physical effort so that the person can achieve some previously set goal" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 120). They go on to point out that the strength of that motivation depends on how much value the individual places on the outcomes he or she wishes to achieve. The students need to be intrinsically motivated and interested in the subject they are studying, as well as in the activities they are presented with. In fact, most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting (Illich, 1972). Of course, to make change occur in a situation, new action needs to be taken.

Methods

Participants

My students were between 17 and 21 years old, and they were registered in the school from two major sources: The first group was made up of students who were recruited directly by the school through an entrance test that takes place every year before classes open. The second group was those who were posted by the Ministry in charge of education. When they passed the national exams that give access to high school, they were transferred from their grammar schools into the public high schools where they attend the upper grades. The classes are mixed classes (girls and boys) with an average of 20 - 25 students. In most of the cases, the students' had an extremely limited proficiency in English, certainly due to the fact that they could not practice the language once they were out of the classroom. They were allocated only two hours of English instruction per week in the past.

Instructional Procedure

For three months (the first term of the academic year) the students read short story books, but it was done first with their agreement and then with the agreement of their parents, for it was an additional task that would require more work time from the learners. This additional work that was required could affect the student's performance in some other disciplines if it were not done correctly. That's why this new experiment had to be implemented with care, because the objective was to solve a problem, not to create new problems. It required the commitment of the school, colleagues, parents, the concerned teacher, and students. Here are the steps I took to implement short story reading in my class:

Step 1: I addressed a correspondence to the different stakeholders—the head of school, the

parents, and my colleagues—to explain clearly what I intended to do, and to ask for their

commitment. They had one week to reply. No reply from a parent after one week meant disagreement. In that case, the head of school approached the parent to understand why.

Step 2: I received replies confirming agreement for the project and also the commitment of other stakeholders.

Step 3: I asked the head of school to grant two more hours for the English class to help cover ten presentations every week (see step 7). With the contribution of other colleagues, I selected a series of short stories in English that did not exceed 50 pages (see a list of stories in Appendix B). The short stories were about daily life issues such as corruption, hatred, love for money, love, the thug life, cheating, respect, etc.

Step 4: A first wave of 10 students selected their short story books and started their reading while the second wave waited one week in order to create a space between the first and the second group. Students were expected to read two books per month.

Step 5: The students were expected to complete a reading sheet (see “Results” for an example reading sheet). They filled out their reading sheets providing information about the title of the book, the author, the theme(s) developed in the book, the characters, the most striking issue, and the summary. The second part of the sheet concerned the appreciation of the reader. How did he/she like the story? What did he/she learn from the story? What were the challenges? How did he/she overcome the difficulties? What new words did he/she acquire?

Step 6: The students were required to return a first draft of their reading sheet after one week. This allowed me to check students’ progress and prepare feedback on the sheets. It also allowed me to talk with colleagues about the sheets, to share information and collect their suggestions.

Step 7: After two weeks, the first wave of students gave a 10-minute presentation followed by five minutes of questions if necessary. After one presentation, followed by classmates' questions, I provided brief feedback before giving the floor to the next student. My colleague attended these presentations and held a video recorder. After the last presentation, my colleague and I provided feedback and appreciation and closed by encouraging the students.

Step 8: I organized an interview with the students before they started their second short story. I asked questions of the students in order to collect details related to the student's personal feelings after reading, such as the effect of the story on his/her own life and what he/she learned from the story (see Appendix A for the interview questions).

Step 9: Using the different notes taken down on the sheet, the colleague's observations, and the students' testimony during interviews, I produced a report about each student's presentations. The report pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of the students' presentations and made some suggestions for improvement. One copy went to the student himself/herself, another to the head of school and the last one to the parents. The report provided an update on the student's progress.

Step 10: After that came the second wave of students. They participated in the same steps. The whole procedure was repeated every two weeks for a total of three months.

Data Collection Procedure

The data was collected from three main sources: the observation of the students' presentations, the students' reading sheets, and the interviews.

Observations of student presentations.

During each presentation, the student delivered the details mentioned on his/her reading sheets; I followed along on the revised draft provided by the students previously. I made sure that there was not any difference between what was said and what was written. The colleague holding the video recorder made a video of the presentation in order to capture even the smallest details that could be helpful in the review for constructive feedback. I listened and observed the student's attitude (the way he/she presented the work) to see if he/she was comfortable presenting his/her own work. I took notes about striking details related to weaknesses and strengths. After the presentation, five minutes of unexpected questions from classmates allowed me to observe and note the student's reaction to new questions that were not on the reading sheet. This revealed additional information on the comprehension of the book, the new vocabulary acquired, the fluency, and the correctness of sentences.

Reading sheets.

After reading the short story book, the students filled out the reading sheet and sent a draft to me. I went through them checking the form and content before providing comments if necessary and returned the sheets to the students for revision. The students revised the sheet and provided an updated draft for me before his/her presentation. I kept the revised draft as data.

Interviews.

The structured interview involved the teacher and the students in a discreet talk to collect information. I directly asked the students to rate their agreement with a series of 10 questions, and also asked them to provide additional comments if they had something else to say. While interviewing the students, I filled in a chart with the answers provided by the students, lodging each answer in its column. I interviewed the students again after each story they completed.

Data Analysis Procedure

All the collected data were analyzed to determine common themes, and to make a final decision concerning the effectiveness of the newly integrated material.

Observations of student presentations.

The three sources of the data collected from the students' presentations were the teacher's notes, the recordings, and the colleague's notes. First, both notes were compared to separate the similarities from the differences. The similarities were considered as evidence while the differences were discussed in order to come to a consensus about the student's current attitude. After that, the recordings were reviewed together (the colleague and I) to better understand the student's actions. The colleague commented on the videos and explained details he noticed. When I had my colleague's viewpoint about the presentations, I compared it to my vision of things and drew a conclusion. This conclusion was compared to the previous ones to determine whether the student had made progress.

Reading sheets.

I collected the students' reading sheets and read them one by one, making sure that they completed all the parts. From these sheets, I could know if the story was understood or not. After that I considered the accuracy of the answers, the correctness of the sentences, and the words used. I proceeded this way up to the end, compiling the best products and the lower performers that would constitute another accurate analysis. This part of the work was compared to the interview sheets to make sure that there was coherence between what was said and what was written. I classified them according to the success rate: from the least satisfying answers to the most satisfying ones.

Interviews.

I tallied students' responses to interview questions to appreciate the students' viewpoint. The interview sheets were arranged according to the success rate: from the least positive answers to the most positive. The latest sheets were also compared to the previous ones to see whether there was any positive change. Answers of "not at all" or "somewhat" meant that there were still hesitations or lack of confidence; it also revealed that some problems related to comprehension still existed.

Results**Findings**

The purpose of this action research was to improve the students' attitude towards reading comprehension by getting them to solve their own difficulties through story book reading. It covered a period of three months during which the students gave presentations, produced reading sheets and attended interviews with the teacher. The following data gives details on the students' performance at the end of the third month.

Observations of student presentations.

During the presentations, my colleague and I were impressed by two major things: the presenters' attitude and the audience's attitude. These aspects came out in both of our notes as positive facts. The presenter was often confident when performing and the students were eager not only to discover the story but also to see their classmate perform. They were careful and interested in the activity. We could see, when reviewing the recordings, some students taking notes and some others formulating questions about aspects on which they needed more details.

There was not any hesitation in the presenters' attitude; they could deliver information from their reading sheets and answer unexpected questions using correct sentences. Their answers were convincing and showed that they actually understood the story they read. Another positive fact we noted was the instantaneous reactions of students. They laughed together when the presenter said something funny; they reacted to correct a little mistake that occurred. These actions also proved that they could understand what was said. The motivation they showed during the presentations was much better than what they used to show before this action research.

Reading sheets.

Twenty students took part in the experimental reading and completed the reading sheets. For each student, I compared the entire sheet first, checking the form and the contents of the responses. From the last short stories that were read, I collected 20 sheets fully completed by the students. The students' names were replaced by the letters from A to T which correspond to 20 students. I made sure that all the parts were fully completed before selecting one at random among them. The example sheet shown in Table 1 is from Student L.

Table 1
A Student Sheet after Reading

READING SHEET #	
Reading period	August 9 - August 16
Reader's identity	Student L
The book title	Too late to claim
Writer's name	George Nasser Haick
Major issue developed	Unwanted pregnancy
Other theme(s)/issue(s) developed	Rape The weight of tradition Forgiveness Irresponsibility of the youth
The main character(s)	Abena the orphan girl
Other characters	Aunt Mercy Owusu John the law student Mrs. Owusu's kids Abena's son

	The doctor The nurses, etc.
<p>Make a short summary of the book</p> <p>Abena an orphan girl living with Mr Owusu her aunt was got pregnant by John, the law student and Aunt Owusu's son after a rape. She mentioned John to be responsible unfortunately he denied it. So, Abena was thrown out of the house with her pregnancy. She gave birth to a boy. Year later, John was victim of an accident and was near to die if there were not any compatible donor to save his life. The only one donor was his rejected son who accepted to save his father's.</p> <p>After recovering, he wanted to take his son with him, but it was too late. . .</p>	
The most striking detail	Abena had forgiven all the evil she was victim of and came the rescue John.
<p>Comment</p> <p>(How did you like the story? What did you learn from the story? What were the challenges? How did you overcome the difficulties? What new words did you acquire?)</p> <p>The story was very interesting, full of actions that could put tears in any reader's eyes. I was impressed by Abena's capacity to forgive. I learned that whatever you do, good or bad, you will harvest in a long round. I used a dictionary to understand difficult words, I also ask for help to my mother and my senior sister. I acquired words like: rape; a well- to- do business woman; pregnancy; law study; vehemently whole; disappointed raged etc</p>	

When we have a simple look at the chart, we can easily notice that there is not any empty space left by Student L. All the parts were perfectly completed. She succeeded in providing clear answers corresponding to the questions. Moreover, the paragraphs were well written with simple and correct sentences and expressions, something that most of the students could not do few months ago.

Interviews.

All 20 student participants were interviewed. The final evaluation revealed that only two students showed a small degree of confidence for the first question, whereas 12 showed higher confidence and six were entirely convinced that the books were adapted to their level. For questions 2, 4, and 10 the responses are all "mostly" or "yes, very." For questions 3, 5, 6, 7,

8, and 9 all the students gave the highest response (“yes, very”). See Table 2 for complete results of the interview.

Table 2
Student Responses to Interview Questions

Questions	Number of responses			
	not at all	somewhat	mostly	yes, very
Were the short story books adapted to you level?		2	12	6
Did the topics developed fit your context?			4	16
Did you like reading the short stories?				20
Did the reading tasks meet your needs?			3	17
Did you learn from the readings?				20
Is the new vocabulary helpful?				20
Is there any improvement?				20
Will you recommend it to your friends?				20
Has it enriched your reading skill?				20
Do you feel enough confident when given reading tasks?			5	15
Supplementary comment				
I worked a lot with my dictionary				
I asked for help when it was necessary (not all the time)				
I enjoyed reading the short stories				

Discussion

This action research was guided by the question: “**If I include short story books in my teaching, how will it affect my students’ attitudes towards reading comprehension?**” The question was motivated by the fact that my students were showing serious weaknesses in their reading skills. During reading comprehension activities, they could hardly complete the tasks related to the text because they could not understand the text. So, it was about getting them to show a more motivated attitude during classroom activities.

When we consider the data above, the tendency is positive. I could observe major changes in the students’ attitudes. Except for the first interview question, most of the students’

responses showed mostly or completely confident attitudes. They liked reading the short stories, and they worked with dictionaries and asked for help only when it was necessary. It means that they succeeded developing a more autonomous attitude. They developed techniques to overcome their own difficulties. They felt more confident in their presentation, and discussions were more active in the classroom. They interacted with each other inside and outside the classroom.

Reading a short literary excerpt was no longer a big deal for them because a short story was 10 times the length of a short excerpt. Students had more positive attitudes and this could be seen through their participation during classes. The students felt comfortable reacted better during classroom activities. The short story reading activities had considerably changed the students' attitude towards reading comprehension. Now, they are able to achieve what they could not do before.

Conclusion

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a very difficult task. Each teacher has his/her own experience depending on the teaching context. The context may be less challenging if the students are motivated to learn the foreign language due to goals such as travel or studies abroad. On the other hand, the teaching context can be difficult if the learners do not have any other motivation to learn the new language except for the fact that they need it to pass an exam. When I added the reading of short stories to cope with some learning difficulties in my personal context, students' attitudes improved and their motivation increased. This improved the teaching process as well as the learning. This technique calls for the commitment of many stakeholders: students, teacher, colleagues, the head of school and the parents. They worked hand in hand for the good of the students.

If students can read a story of up to 50 pages with a positive attitude, a short literary excerpt is no longer difficult for them. Including short story reading showed that it is possible to improve student motivation. The most striking thing that the students discovered through this experimentation is that “the things we discover for ourselves are absorbed more effectively than things we are taught” (Lewis, 1986, p. 165). Indeed, this is more important than the acquisition of factual information (Williams & Burden, 1997). The collaboration of the different stakeholders working together for the success of the project is also an important contributing factor to the success of this project.

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Appendix A: Teacher Interview Chart

Questions	not at all	somewhat	mostly	yes, very
Were the short story books adapted to you level?				
Did the topics developed fit your context?				
Did you like reading the short stories?				
Did the reading tasks meet your needs?				
Did you learn from the readings?				
Is the new vocabulary helpful?				
Is there any improvement?				
Will you recommend it to your friends?				
Has it enriched your reading skill?				
Do you feel enough confident when given reading tasks?				
Supplementary comment				

Appendix B: A Sample of Short Story Books Studied by the Students

- “The Boy with a Tail” by Harriet Decker, 2008 Harrimore Exclusive Graphix
- “Too Late to Claim” by George Nasser Haick
- “I Blame My Mother (A Convict’s Confession)” by Asante Yeboah
- “Tribal War” by I. K. Donkor
- “Celebration” by Abraham Kumasi
- “Passion for Money” by I. K. Donkor
- “The Midwife with Seven Eyes” by Daniel Edzorna Darkudzi
- “Double Game (Who Are the Greatest Cheats, Men or Women?)” unknown author
- “The Pregnant Virgin” by Isaac Adu Asamoah
- “Some Friends Are Dangerous, Take Care!” by Otoo Joyce
- “Why the Cat Kills the Mice” by John Ato Sarbah



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