

# Research question: Does reading and talking about reading within the context of an ESOL reading group help learners to develop their confidence?

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**Why am I investigating this research question?**

- To evaluate the benefits of reading and attending a voluntary discussion group.
- To explore ways in which the learners can stay in touch and support one another outside of the group.

**What did we do?**

- Learners attended a monthly lunchtime reading group.
- It was a relaxed meeting away from the formal classroom environment.
- The room was a counselling room in the college library where we had access to a selection of graded readers including ESOL specific readers.
- The room also had a smart board so we could look at digital books, online readers, short film clips and also access the blog which I set up for learners to upload recommendations and comments.
- We sat in easy chairs, shared the stories they had read, chatted and sometimes laughed with other students over a drink and a snack.

**Who was involved?**

- Three Entry 3 ESOL classes were invited to take part.
- 19 learners attended in September and then numbers began to drop each month for a variety of reasons.
- In December 3 learners attended and 2 in January.
- Between 6 and 8 students attending regularly from February and these numbers continued until the final session in May 2013.
- Although the group was open to everyone, only one man attended the group in September and he only came once. As a result of this the group became a women only group.

**Recommendations and next steps.**

- My own research into this question will continue albeit in a slightly different context. Next year I will build a regular 'reading group' element in to my weekly classes. It seems clear that for students anything 'optional' will be the first thing to go due to largely unavoidable personal issues. I believe this should not happen with reading. As Duncan's (2012) research shows, learners benefit in so many different ways, this type of activity has both 'a valuable pedagogy for developing speaking and listening skills, vocabulary and greater confidence in reading and writing,' and 'a potentially profound role in individuals' lives'.
- Through my own research I have found that not only have learners developed confidence in their ability to read and write in English but that they also developed personally. They feel more comfortable about speaking in front of other people and of being able to explain, express their opinions and respond to questions.
- I intend to ask the volunteers from the reading group to write an article for a resource which I will use as evidence to convince future learners of the benefits of being part of a reading group.
- I am also issuing certificates of achievement for those learners who attended the sessions regularly and intend for them to be awarded publicly along with other personal successes at the end of year party. At the same time I hope to be able to publicise a new reading group which will run from next September 2013 and will be managed by the learners themselves.
- With the support of my CTL I aim to enlist the support of the ESOL librarian who could oversee the bookings of the rooms for the reading group to meet in and any practical issues such as health and safety that need staff involvement. The overall feeling from this year's reading group is that they would welcome this development and their only concern was they would wish for it to remain a women only group. I feel that this is possibly because they are still building their confidence and would hope to see more groups, including mixed groups developing in future.
- I intend to disseminate the findings from my research to my colleagues at our team meeting and encourage tutors to let their learners know about the success of this year's reading group and what they can do to get involved.
- I published an article in the IATEFL ESOL SIG newsletter about my research in January 2013.
- I will attend the annual NATECLA conference this summer and will discuss my project with fellow professionals.

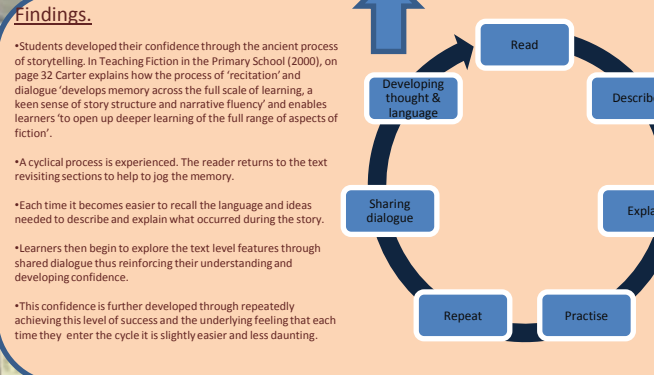


**What happened?**

- The students that attended every group and read books each month were very positive and 100% of them commented that they had improved in some way or another. For example "I feel more confident now", "I am better in pronouncing words", "I improved my reading" and "I enjoyed, now I can explain the stories".
- The students also agreed that they had benefited from the small group size and the extra time spent talking with their teacher and their peers.
- As the students got to know each other and began to relax, the conversations became increasingly more personal and sensitive. Learners were able to explore issues which they may not have felt comfortable discussing in class.
- We used the stories as a focus and a structure for our discussion. One student also commented that the reading group gave her a deadline by which she knew she had to complete her reading books.

**Methodology and intervention.**

- I was careful to make sure the students understood what they were taking part in and how the information would be used. Some students chose to leave the group at this point.
- I asked those learners who were happy to take part to complete 2 questionnaires one at the start of the project and one in February so I could compare their responses.
- I conducted individual interviews with students and we also used the reading group as a focus group for regular discussion about the project.
- I showed them a selection of readers and read aloud from them. We also watched short clips of films to try to bring some of the stories to life and I regularly showed the group how they could access websites with digital books and audio content.
- I drew their attention to the fact that some of the books they chose were written by ESOL students and suggested that they could also think about publishing their own stories.
- I encouraged some learners and helped others to sign up the blog so they could upload their summaries, make recommendations or just comment.



**Results of the intervention.**

- Learners took the recommendations from their peers very seriously and I noticed that they chose the same readers from the library.
- As time went on they chose readers which were short and easy to read so that they could read them quickly and explain the stories more easily.
- None of the learners commented or uploaded anything to the blog.
- In the middle of the project the blog, which was hosted by posterous announced that they were closing the site down and were not accepting new sign ups. The blog was then archived in May.
- Learners found it difficult to use the blog even with help and most said they did not have the time to devote to exploring it.
- No one in the group used websites to access reading texts.

**Strengths and limitations.**

There were limitations to the project as it was a small scale study with limited access to the learners. The sessions were only once a month and the students felt that one hour was not enough time. It was further limited by the project timetable and by students own personal issues. Although the drop out rate at the beginning of the project was alarming at first, this did in fact become one of the strengths of the reading group as it developed a personal feel.

This was a practice focussed study in which I engaged with literature to inform my thinking about how to approach the problem that I had encountered over the previous three years of my teaching. I engaged with the learners at their own level in keeping with Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development and listened to their opinions and their feedback (Fielding, M. 2012). These student voices are at the core of my research and can be heard through out.