

conversation, encourage the students' talking as well as for educational purposes.

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TO READ OR NOT AT TERTIARY LEVEL? AN EFL OVERVIEW FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Summary

This article explores the manifold benefits students at tertiary level can get from developing a passion for reading and handling a variety of strategies to retrieve, above literal meaning, a valuable asset of extra-linguistic knowledge that will entitle them to become effective users of English in a variety of communicational contexts. Communicative competence is not limited to linguistic competence and reading is the best way to ensure its development by gaining knowledge from various contexts about what is appropriate and what is not in a given situation.

It is generally admitted that the main objective of foreign language classes is to make learners use the language in real life communication, that is – to develop their communicative skills. In striving to reach this major goal, teachers engage students in miscellaneous activities, apply a wide range of communicative strategies, and what is mostly important, make extensive use of authentic materials. All these, judiciously explored and applied on a

regular basis are meant to improve students' communicative competence. We design communicative situations trying to implement as many as possible up-to-date techniques, sometimes ignoring the rudest mistakes for the sake of fluency and choose materials that are usually not very bulky or that simply appeal to learners. But what about reading, reading extensively for pleasure and not only? I might be highly subjective in my estimates, but I have found that university students are, to put it mildly, quite reserved when it is about doing some reading. The majority consider it a purposeless ordeal that will only steal a lot of their so precious time. Unfortunately, students and teachers sometimes seem to forget that reading is the greatest authentic resource to improve all components of the communicative competence and all language skills. It is irrefutable that reading keeps its status of being the most effective strategy to use in order to improve both linguistic knowledge and increase the students' awareness of cultural differences. This aversion towards reading cannot be uprooted overnight and the teacher who has the greatest expectations from a language class where a literary text is to be explored is at a loss, to say the least. The fault is not entirely theirs, but being university students implies doing enormous amounts of extensive readings and at this age range and level it is not a piece of cake to raise their motivation to read and to develop a passion for it. Their lacking strong reading skills turns into a number of difficulties for them when they are face to face with an authentic piece of writing and even worse, when they have to do some extensive reading.

The recent time reforms in Moldova's system of education in general and at tertiary level, particularly, have brought to the surface some realities that have been kept under silence for a while. One of the problems that university teachers and students face on a regular basis is the fact that the latter come from high school with extensively heterogeneous levels of English proficiency, a significant

impact being caused by inefficient and insufficient exposure to reading.

In this context, the language learning outcomes are inevitably reduced for a number of reasons, all of them interrelated and interdependent. One that deserves due attention and consideration starting from primary school refers to some nationwide applied strategies that would increase students' awareness about the importance of reading. At tertiary level, it is even more significant as the amount of materials to cover is extensively larger and their incapacity to retrieve what is really of some value ends up in a number of different failures. Students should all make a creed of Dr. Seuss' words: "The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." Starting from an early age, children must be taught about the benefits of reading so that when they get to pursue higher education it does not appear as the most useless and tedious task.

It is also worth mentioning that in our context we refer to English as a foreign language and the communicative competences are developed mainly in a formal setting with reduced possibilities for real life interactions outside the classroom. The conjuncture of these limiting conditions hinders enormously the notable development of students' communicative competence unless they are the ones who make real efforts and strive to get the best from their classes. This corollary shows that students training to become teachers of English must get more involved in learning activities so that they can reach a level of proficiency suitable for the teaching career. Otherwise, their sojourn at the university will pay nothing else than a certificate they will be unable to take advantage of.

Reading is the one guaranteed way of saving many of them extra headaches when they are on their own in front of schoolchildren as they will already be in possession of remarkable knowledge they could adapt to their situational needs. It is irrefutable truth that reading develops learner autonomy, especially extensive

reading, as it is a private, individual activity that can be done anywhere and at any time. Apart from this, no other art is capable to develop one's creativity to the same extent as literature does. The reader is able to stop whenever they feel like it to visualize and analyze what they have read and everyone involved will do it in his/her own way, in accordance with their experiences.

Due to the status that English has gained worldwide in recent years, it becomes even more significant to learn and be able to identify and handle different worldviews and adopt the appropriate communicative strategies in order to make oneself understood. Being at ease with standard English does not guarantee the user will cope adequately with real life communication. A student who learns English in a formal setting is expected to be twofold aware of cultural differences and languages are the place where these are brought in the limelight and paid due attention. Unlike those who acquire a foreign language naturally, through direct exposure to it and as an active participant in real life interactions, students who learn English in an formal setting will have to double their efforts to identify, distinguish, analyze, compare, etc. and then learn to use appropriately different elements that develop intercultural communication. Reading materials offer a huge pool of linguistic and culture-related issues that can be approached in a variety of ways for EFL students. And the learning outcomes are of incredible value for the students as they broaden their general background knowledge, expand vocabulary and develop critical thinking skills. Without this skill, there simply cannot be any kind of efficient interaction. In contemporary society with multilingual communities and a huge variety of interactions amongst them, it is essential for users of English as an international language to show mastery of different skills and they are expected to possess „adaptability to select those forms of accuracy and those forms of appropriateness that are called for in a given social context of use” rather than „the ability to speak and write according to the rules of the academy and the social

etiquette of one social group” [4]. In the same context, Kramersch promotes the concept of „intercultural speaker” who is aware of his/her own culture as well as of that of the others, emphasizing the idea that linguistic competence is not enough for effective communication and understanding to happen[ibid]. It should be complemented by extensive awareness and knowledge of other cultures. The same author points that intercultural competence should be considered the fifth language skill and it deserves as much attention as reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Stephan Krashen argues that reading is indubitably the best way of achieving progress in language acquisition. It makes the core of his input hypotheses and he states that „We acquire vocabulary and spelling by reading” [5]. A larger vocabulary means more possibilities to speak. Knowing the right word for the right thing will save one many headaches and give them the chance to avoid feeling embarrassed and posing barriers to conversation. Far too often students in an EFL classroom shift from English to their mother tongue because they lack the right words to express ideas. This shifting inevitably produces ruptures in their speech and it does not help them in any way if they continue to resort to native language for help instead of trying to make use of some other linguistic or even extra-linguistic knowledge they already possess.

Quite often, when writing something, students reinvent English spelling to such a level it might seem inconceivable. It is particularly the case of those who learned it from audio-video resources. Indeed, English spelling is remarkably tricky and not knowing the correct spelling of words can cause conflicts and bring humiliation to the writer. But through regular sessions of reading, the situation will definitely change. As Krashen points, „*our writing style does not come from writing or from direct instructions, but from reading*” [7]. Studies reveal that students who read on a regular basis do much better in written tests as compared to those who do not read.

Students at tertiary level, particularly those intending to become teachers of English, ought to be taught about the benefits gained from reading before teaching them reading for other purposes. They should acknowledge the great influence reading has on their personal and professional growth, no matter what the source of their reading materials is. The observation that the digital generation is reluctant to read is not new at all; but digital gadgets can be wisely used for this purpose. Technology comes forward with a number of reading devices and applications that can be used any time if we belong to the category of those who prefer the convenience of digital downloads. Kindle, Nook, iPad, etc are just some examples.

Though there are authors claiming that form accounts for little in the development of communicative competence, it is essential to note that reading will not simply improve their communicative skills; it will also play a significant role in their developing a flair for accuracy. Repeated encounters with certain structures will gradually imprint in their memories and thus they will be able to formulate correct structures without having to stop and double check if they are using the right form. From personal experience I can say that all those students who „befriend” reading face by far fewer problems when learning English as a foreign language as compared to those who read just to complete some specific tasks. They are more self-confident and this improves their performance in a foreign language. It does not imply that their communicative competence will be close to a native speaker’s as even this concept is subject to much criticism and is said to be highly idealized [10].

The controversy that arises about what should be learned and what should not in order to develop strong communicative competence has not reached any consensus yet, but what has been confirmed is the fact that reading boosts the students’ potential to grow, to enlarge their socio-cultural world and to get a feel for what is appropriate to use in a given situation and what is not. Reading students have their say in shifting from teacher –centered classes to

student –centered ones. They come to classes with ideas to share and do not wait for the teacher to supply them with everything ready-made.

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