

USING LITERARY TEXTS AS SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS TO IMPROVE READING SKILLS FOR THE FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT MILITARY SCIENCE ACADEMY

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Abstract: The study aims at measuring the hypothesis that the use of literary texts as extra materials in reading lessons can enhance students' reading ability and increase their English proficiency on the whole. The method used in the study is mainly quantitative research method. In order to seek answers to the hypothesis question, two sets of questionnaire were designed and delivered to 20 teachers and 105 first-year students at Military Science Academy (MSA). The findings of the study have pointed out some areas of ineffectiveness of the textbook in use (Cause and Effect). To better the situation, what we need is to adapt the textbook combining with the use of literary texts as extra materials. From the results of the study, the authors have presented some suggestions on selecting appropriate literary texts, assigning and assessing students' performance through a model of extensive reading.

Key words: literary texts, reading skills, supplementary materials

1. Introduction

Along with the other language macro-skills, reading plays an important part in learning a foreign language as it helps students make extensive use of academic materials written in English. A successful language learning process is said to rely on many factors such as teachers, learners, and materials, among which materials are of great importance, as Crawford (2002) claims, learning materials scaffold the work of both teachers and students.

At MSA, *Cause and Effect* (Ackert, 2008) has been recommended and used as a core textbook to teach reading skills to the first-year students as it is supposed to be a rather reliable source to enhance students' reading ability. However, *Cause and Effect* belongs to commercial textbooks designed for learners all over the world. On discussing these materials, O'Neill (1982, p. 81) states, "Each group is so unique that its need cannot be met by materials which are designed for another group." Actually, any textbook should be used judiciously, since it cannot cater equally to the requirements of every classroom setting. The textbook is a tool, and the teacher must know not only how to use it, but how useful it can be.

Moreover, there have emerged diverse opinions of both the learners and the teachers at MSA on the actual effectiveness of the reading lessons and the currently-used textbook *Cause and Effect*. The teachers of reading subject, from time to time, complain about spending a lot of time compiling and adapting materials in order to meet their students' need and to make their reading lessons more interesting. As for the students, they seem not to be satisfied with the reading lessons and the textbook. For most of the exercises in the textbook, the students can write the answers in the book at home and the teacher simply goes over them orally with the students in class, explaining or elaborating here and there as necessary. More importantly, students do not know how to get appropriate extra reading materials and what sources to consult; they simply read whatever available in hand. Consequently,

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their reading scores in the first term of their first year were not as good as they expected.

On talking about using literary materials in teaching reading skills, Snow (2002) argues that literature is a valuable instrument in facilitating reading comprehension. Using literary materials that are relevant and appealing to learners in order to gain from the advantages of literary texts in teaching reading comprehension is also a valuable asset. In addition to all types of written material, literary works are precious materials to be exploited for reading comprehension activities because literary texts provide students with the opportunity to expand on the limits of the text by integrating readers' experiences and beliefs into meanings of the text.

All these reasons have inspired me to carry out this study entitled "Using literary texts as supplementary materials to improve reading skills for the first-year English majors at Military Science Academy", with a hope to have a deeper look into this complicated field of English in order to deal with it more thoroughly and effectively.

2. Literature review

2.1. Reading skills and its related aspects

Firstly, it should be pointed out that the term *reading skills* and *reading strategies* are often used interchangeably. Besides, reading techniques is sometimes used to refer to mental activities that help students get success in the reading process. At the same time, reading strategies are understood as the mental operations involve when readers approach a text effectively to make sense of what they read (Nuttall, 1996). Good readers apply strategies more frequently and more effectively than poor readers.

On talking about ways to exploit reading texts, Nuttall (1996) has given several reading skills and some basic ones are listed here under: making prediction, skimming, scanning, recognizing implications and making references, *recognizing text organization*, *guessing the meaning of words based on structural and contextual clues*, *understanding syntax*, *recognizing and interpreting cohesive devices*. On the other hand, Mackay (1982) points out seven important reading skills as follows: *deducing the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items*, *recognizing indicators in discourse*, *extracting salient points to summarize*, *using basic reference skill*, *skimming to get general information*, *scanning to locate specifically required information*, *transferring information to diagrammatical display*. However, one of the principal characteristics of a good reader is flexibility. He varies his speed, and his whole manner of reading, according to the text and his purpose in reading it. Therefore, teachers should show students that it is crucial to vary their strategy and speed according to the purpose of reading.

2.2. Literary materials as supplementary materials for teaching reading skills

"Supplementary materials" is one of the basic terms in a glossary proposed by Tomlinson (1998) in materials development in language teaching. In his opinion, supplementary materials are defined as "materials designed to be used in addition to the core materials of a course. They are usually related to the development of skills of reading, writing, listening or speaking rather than to the learning of language items." (p.8)

Actually, most language-teaching course books probably need supplementing to some extent, if only in order to tailor them to the needs of a particular class or to offer richer options. According to Ur (1991), there are 'packages' of supplementary materials such as computers, simplified readers,

overhead projectors, posters, pictures, official documents, newspapers, magazines. Apart from those, literature is a valuable instrument in facilitating reading comprehension. Sharing the same point, Mackay (1982) confirms through extensive or intensive reading of works of literature, students are exposed to lexical items that are embedded within natural linguistic applications. This exposure further enables language learners to gradually acquire meanings as native speakers do. Since they are contextualized, these texts provide learners with a wide variety of registers, text types and styles that are at different difficulty levels. Here, literature gains importance since it may be used as one of the basic components of reading comprehension.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

As a basis for this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the teachers' and the students' evaluations of the current textbook Cause and Effect?
2. What do they think of using literary texts as supplementary materials to enhance students' reading ability?

3.2. Participants

The study was carried out with the participation of 20 (out of 31) teachers and 105 (out of 115) first-year students. Among the teachers, 8 have either been to Australia or American for further study, all have M.A degree in Education or Linguistics. Most of them have at least ten years' teaching experience, teaching both in the English Department and for general education requirements in other Departments.

Of the total number of 115 students in the classes under investigation namely 13AD1, 13AD2, 13AD3, 10 were absent on the day of questionnaire delivery. Therefore, the total number of students who took part in the research was 105. They include both male and female representatives, ranging from the age of 18 to 22. All of them learned English at secondary school and nearly completed their first year at university. However, their level of English proficiency was not high and it varied significantly due to the fact that they came from different parts in Vietnam with different background knowledge. The students under investigation belonged to civilian section (at MSA there are 2 separated sections: military and civilian), and they had finished their first-term and were at the end of the second-term of the first-year at MSA. Thus, they were supposed to be at intermediate level of English proficiency.

3.3. Data collection instruments

In this study, the main instrument for data collection is questionnaire, which is a relatively popular means of collecting data (Harmer, 1992). It enables the researcher to gather data in field settings, and the data themselves are more amendable to quantification than discursive data. To obtain data for the study, two written questionnaires were administered to the subjects. One was designed for the teachers and the other for the students. The questionnaires were designed with a mixture of closed and open-ended questions. All the questions in the questionnaires were simple and concise. They were: yes-no questions, choosing from options (by circling the item), putting items in order, etc. The questionnaires aimed mainly to survey the teachers and the students' evaluation of the textbook and

their opinions towards using literary texts as supplementary materials in reading classes. Respondents could be free to express their thoughts about the items raised in the questionnaires. The participants were asked about their opinions about the current textbook *Cause and Effect* and the use of literary texts as supplementary materials in reading lessons. The questionnaire consists of 11 questions. The first 5 questions were related to the first research question. The remaining 6 questions were about the second research question. Besides, another source of data gathered was from informal interviews with both teachers and students to find out what they had done, thought, and learned in reading lessons aided by literary texts.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Results from research question 1

The preliminary evaluation of the current textbook Cause and Effect.

The participants were asked about some certain aspects of the textbook: the reading texts, the topics; the exercises types accompanying the reading texts in the textbook.

What is noteworthy from this study is that most of the respondents are not satisfied with the current textbook. This is justified by the concrete numbers which show that as many as 40% of the teachers and 48% of the students find the current textbook not very interesting and unable to improve students' reading ability and that there must be some improvements to be made. Some areas of inappropriateness and insufficiency in the textbook can be sorted as follows. The very first thing should be mentioned is that the book totally lacks 2 important stages: pre-reading and post-reading. Needless to say, each stage has its own characteristics and plays a role of equal importance in the reading process. Each stage has a different goal and deals with different reading strategies. Second, some topics (Explorers, a Mishmash) receive negative response from the participants as they claim these topics are not of their interests, some even further comment that these themes are of no use and unpractical for their studying and their life. Last, other kinds of reading should be added. The exercise-types, as can be seen in the textbook *Cause and Effect*, are 4 main ones including comprehension questions, true/false, main ideas, and guessing words from the context clues. Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to adapt or design challenging and varied tasks to reinforce students' reading development. In short, despite a number of good points it has, the current textbook still fails to satisfy both teachers and students. Thus, it needs some improvements and adjustments so that it can both fit the needs and interests of the students and fulfill the academic requirements. Depending on the aim of teaching reading comprehension and the students' levels, the literary texts or the communicative texts should be exploited. It is noted that incorporating literature as supplementary materials in a language curriculum is time-consuming; especially where a curriculum is so fixed that a teacher must be careful with every minute she spends in the classroom. Even so, it should be done when we consider the payoff it brings to our students, who become "more efficient, more responsible, more self-directing, and more autonomous" (Mackay, 1982, p. 23).

4.2. Results from research question 2

The participants' attitudes towards the use of literary texts as supplementary materials in reading lessons.

Table 1. The frequency of the teachers in using and students in reading supplementary materials

Options	Teachers' choice		Students' choice	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Always	2	10%	0	0%
Often	8	40%	32	30,5%
Sometimes	10	50%	58	55%
Never	0	0%	15	14,5%

All the participants clearly see the importance of supplementary materials in the course of teaching and learning reading skills as nearly half of teachers taking part in the survey (40%) often give their students extra readings during their reading lessons and a considerable number of students (30.5%) often read extra texts for self-study to upgrade their knowledge and improve reading ability. It seems that all the teachers and almost all the students see the importance of supplementary materials in teaching and learning reading as most of the respondents use supplementary materials from time to time in the course of teaching and learning reading skills.

As depicted in Table 2, most of the respondents are aware of the effectiveness of supplementary materials to their reading lessons. Firstly, what can be seen clearly from the table is that most of the participants respond positively to the efficiency of using extra materials and few teachers and not many students show their disagreement towards the mentioned statements. Specifically, the majority of the respondents agree upon the statement that supplementary materials help to enhance reading ability, which is the ultimate aim of reading practice. This point is supported by 90% of teachers and 76% of students who assume that reading materials can help to improve reading skills. 65% of the teachers and 57% of the students state that the reading lessons would be more enjoyable and more varied with the aid of supplementary materials. This is really important as it means the class is no longer rigid and boring but fun and relaxing. It can be confirmed that supplementary materials can be useful as seen from different angles. This data may be useful for the teachers to select and design extra materials to meet the needs and perception of the learners.

Table 2. The effectiveness of using literary texts as supplementary materials in teaching reading skills

Literary texts	Strongly agree		Agree		Don't know		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Ts	Ss	Ts	Ss	Ts	Ss	Ts	Ss	Ts	Ss
Make reading lessons more enjoyable	20%	34%	45%	23%	20%	27,5%	15%	8,6%	0%	6,6%
Help to improve reading skills	35 %	24%	55%	52%	5%	18%	5%	5%	0%	1%
Provide more varied knowledge	25%	18%	55%	46%	15%	26%	5%	5,5%	0%	4,5%
Improve motivation for reading	20%	23%	55%	36%	10%	31%	10%	8%	5%	2%

The information in Table 3 reveals that the students' answers are in great harmony with the teachers'. The greatest proportion of students (84.5%) suggests that *taking notes and summarizing* should be practiced and so do most of the teachers (85%). The second greatest portion (75% of teachers and 74% of students) is in favor of *predicting*. The students also state such skills as *identifying*

the topic of a paragraph, skimming to get specific information, and scanning to get main ideas should be practiced with 71%, 66.5%, and 59%, respectively. The teachers' answers are in line with the students' in that 60% of them are in favor of *skimming to get specific information* and the percentage for *scanning to get main ideas* is 45%. Although some of the strategies or skills seem to overlap, yet they are used for different purposes in reading comprehension.

Table 3. The teachers' and students' suggestions for reading skills to be practiced with literary texts.

Options	Teachers' choice		Students' choice	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Skimming to get main ideas	12	60%	70	66,5%
Scanning to get specific information	9	45%	62	59%
Identifying the topic of a paragraph	14	70%	75	71%
Predicting	15	75%	78	74%
Previewing	7	35%	43	41%
Inferring	8	40%	32	30,5%
Taking notes and summarizing	17	85%	89	84,5%
Guessing word meanings from context clues	6	30%	34	32%
Recognizing implications (hidden meanings)	9	45%	25	23,5%
Others	2	10%	0	0%

In conclusion, most of the participants support the idea that literary texts as supplementary materials should be incorporated into reading comprehension subject as it cannot only motivate learners but also maximize the development of their reading ability. Especially, given the limitations of the textbook, supplementary materials seems to be a good choice to expand the teaching and learning options. Besides, in order to facilitate students' reading, in accordance with familiarizing students with various genres and styles in English, the teacher should pay attention to consolidating students' reading techniques and micro-skills.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

By reviewing some related theories of reading comprehension and materials development, it is important for the teachers at MSA to identify the problems we have in the existing materials and determine what we think would be useful for our students. In order to find out the problems, quantitative method is employed. The ultimate goals of the study are to evaluate the current textbook and to test the effectiveness of using literary texts in reading lessons.

The findings of the study have pointed out some areas of ineffectiveness of the textbook. It is not effective enough to develop students' reading comprehension skills and other related skills. What we need to better the situation is to adapt the textbook by combining it with literary texts as extra materials. Optimistically, most of the participants in the study support the use of literary texts as one way to make up for the insufficiency of the textbook as well as to expose learners to as many kinds of materials as possible. From the results of the study, the author has presented some suggestions on selecting appropriate literary texts, assigning and assessing students' performance through a model of extensive reading. From these major findings the following suggestions are made.

5.1. Adaptation for the improvement of the textbook *Cause and Effect*

Any textbook should be used critically. We, EFL teachers, should be aware of its strong points and limitations in order to make full use of the first and compensate for or neutralize the second. It is necessary for the teachers to develop the textbook for the better and for the sake of teaching and learning. To obtain this goal, the teachers of English at MSA should make some adjustment to the present textbook so that it will become more effective and appropriate for their students. Based on the results of the study, some adaptations can be suggested as follows.

1. Omitting unnecessary exercises or details of the reading texts
2. Adding pre-reading and post-reading
3. Replacing uninteresting topics
4. Designing more tasks (activities and exercises)

5.2. Suggestions for selecting literary texts as supplementary materials

To ensure the success of the teacher in activating his students and improving their reading skills, materials should be selected with great care and guaranteed of the students' interest. Obviously, when selecting texts, we need to find the texts that are suitable for the majority of students in class. Based on the results of the study and 3 main criteria influencing the choice of texts as suggested by Nuttal (1996), the following guidelines are proposed.

First, texts must be in line with the type of the course we are teaching. The course mentioned here is a general English course and intermediate level for the learners. This means selected materials must be those that are for students who know the basic structures of English and have a vocabulary of about 2000 English words.

Second, the selected materials should include a variety of texts and tasks. As investigated, students often complained of boredom with the repeated diet of texts and tasks. They may respond better to more varied materials. In a reading program for general purposes like at MSA, variety should be guaranteed, since one aim is to expose students to all the kinds of text they are likely to encounter after finishing the course.

Next, the content of the text is accessible to the learners; they know enough about it to apply their own background knowledge and to help comprehend the text. If students read the text with an 'empty' mind, or in other words, they have no idea about the text they are reading, it is hard to bring about any success and certainly prevents the improvement of reading skills. Moreover, the text must be suitable for students' interests by providing new, exciting information through natural and learnable language. Only then will reading texts have the potential to bring motivation to students and instill in the students a love for reading.

Last but not least, we should pay attention to other related factors as length of text, the appropriateness of language level, and the exploitability of the text, that is, teachers can make use of the text to develop the students' competence as readers.

5.3. Suggestions for assigning and assessing students' performance

Most teachers and students agree that in order to save class time, literary texts should be assigned for students to do outside the classroom in their own time, monitored by the teacher. It is clear that when students are given a reason to read within the time available, they will begin to form and nurture a habit of reading. After each lesson, the teacher might prepare a variety of literary texts with different reading exercises and reading skills and assign students to complete them at home. The homework exercises may be checked as a warm-up activity in the following lesson. The students should be encouraged to exchange with their peers for self-checking the exercises, and express their opinions or talk about difficulties they encounter while doing the tasks.

In the specific context of MSA, reading comprehension is taught as part of an integrated skills class or as a separate subjects. In both cases, a great deal of attention is paid to intensive reading, rather than extensive reading.

It is the author's suggestion that in reading comprehension course, intensive reading should be combined with extensive reading. The final assessment should be based on the final exam's results and on the students' performance during the course. It is agreed that alternative assessment provides a way of *"observing and scoring students' performance and giving feedback to both students and teachers about the effectiveness of the language learning and teaching involved"* (Brown, 1998, p. 6).

Personally, the author has tried out successfully and now proposes a model of learning and assessment through extensive reading advocated by Day (1993).

With extensive reading, the following activities can be alternatively applied by the teacher to do informal assessment of the students' performance during the course.

Activity 1: Reading Journal

In their journal students write the title, author, level, date they started, and date they finished each reader. After reading, they write a summary of about 100 words for each text. The teacher collects the reading notebooks once a week, reads them, and comments on the progress which students have made. It is known that reaction reports are enjoyable for teachers to read because they give insights into students' thoughts and feelings. If teachers respond to students' reaction reports with their own comments or questions, the reports help to establish a reading community in a way that answering comprehension questions and writing summaries never can.

Activity 2: Vocabulary Journal

Students create a "word bank" which includes a minimum of 10 new and keys words and record them. For each item, students write down the word, its meaning, one example from the text, and one example of their own. The teacher comments on the word choices, examples given, or the amount of vocabulary.

Activity 3: Book Report

Each student reports orally 3 minutes on one literary work he has read in such a way to make others want to read it. Students are encouraged to select their favorite works and literary genres. The report should include the title and author, a brief summary, and what student likes most or the lessons they learn from their selected work. After the report, he/she answers one or more questions from the

teacher or the class.

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SỬ DỤNG NGŨ LIỆU VĂN HỌC LÀM TÀI LIỆU BỔ TRỢ NÂNG CAO KỸ NĂNG ĐỌC HIỂU CHO SINH VIÊN TIẾNG ANH NĂM NHẤT, HỌC VIỆN KHOA HỌC QUÂN SỰ

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu đưa ra giả thuyết rằng việc sử dụng ngữ liệu Văn học làm tài liệu bổ trợ trong việc dạy kỹ năng đọc có thể cải thiện khả năng đọc hiểu nói riêng và năng lực tiếng Anh nói chung cho sinh viên năm thứ nhất Khoa tiếng Anh, Học viện Khoa học Quân sự. Phương pháp định lượng được áp dụng với công cụ nghiên cứu chính là câu hỏi khảo sát được thiết kế và phát tới 20 giáo viên Khoa tiếng Anh và 105 sinh viên năm thứ nhất Khoa tiếng Anh, Học viện Khoa học Quân sự. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy việc lồng ghép các ngữ liệu Văn học vào các tiết dạy đọc là một trong những giải pháp tối ưu cho việc nâng cao chất lượng dạy và học kỹ năng đọc hiểu. Từ kết quả của nghiên cứu, nhóm tác giả đề xuất một số gợi ý để lựa chọn ngữ liệu văn học phù hợp, cũng như hình thức đánh giá khả năng đọc hiểu của sinh viên một cách chính xác nhất.

Từ khóa: kỹ năng đọc hiểu, ngữ liệu văn học, tài liệu bổ trợ