

Effective Strategies to Get Teenagers Hooked on Reading



TAN YIH TYAN

Edgefield Secondary School, Singapore

In a digital age where teenagers are addicted to activities related to technology, reading is losing its appeal. At Edgefield Secondary School, the goal of our reading programme, Read@Edgefield, is simple – to make reading enjoyable and relevant for our students. To encourage extensive reading, the school library is well-stocked with a wide range of literature of different genres by local and international authors. To further support reading, there is a dedicated weekly reading period, fortnightly book recommendations by teachers and students, visits to the library during curriculum hours, partnership with the National Library Board as well as talks and workshops conducted by local and international authors. Through rigorous planning and active involvement by both teachers and students, Read@Edgefield has taken off and witnessed growing interest and enthusiasm in reading among teachers and students. While teachers are excited and motivated to explore other innovative ways to promote school-wide reading, students are engaged, well-informed and empowered.

Educators are well aware of the benefits of Extensive Reading (ER) on language learning. The effectiveness and positive impact of ER on English Language (EL) learning are widely reported and supported by literature in scholarly journals (e.g., Jeon & Day, 2016 and Nakanishi, 2015). Apart from direct gains in reading proficiency and comprehension, learners who engage in ER demonstrate increased competence in listening, speaking and writing abilities. In addition to enhancing language skills acquisition, ER plays an important role in the affective dimension of language learning – it develops positive attitudes and motivation in learners towards reading and language learning. Bamford & Day, key proponents of ER in language education, summarised the benefits of ER thus:

Good things happen to students who read a great deal in the foreign language. Research studies show they become better and more confident readers; they write better, their listening and speaking abilities improve, and their vocabularies become richer. In addition, they develop positive attitudes towards and increased motivation to study the new language. (2004, p. 1)

However, knowing the benefits of ER is one thing; ensuring sufficient opportunities for learners to engage in ER regularly in order to reap these benefits is another. Teachers usually cite two factors as key reasons for not doing enough ER: insufficient time and learners who are uninterested in reading.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to share the programmes and activities that have been effective at creating a supportive and conducive reading environment to stimulate an interest in reading among students of Edgefield Secondary School

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(EFSS). These include collaboration with external parties to provide additional support and resources so that the issue of time constraint can be addressed to a certain extent.

Objectives

Unlike countries with a strong reading culture, most teachers in Singapore find cultivating an interest and love for reading in our students a challenging endeavour. The absence of a reading culture does not mean that Singaporeans are not reading at all. According to a study conducted by global research consultancy TNS, Singaporeans aged between 16 to 30 spend an average of 3.4 hours a day on their mobile phones (Hutt, 2017). A good part of the time is likely spent on some form of reading – usually of shorter articles, excerpts, summaries, reviews – on social media sites or other online sources. However, what the Singapore government and educators advocate is serious reading of literary texts, nonfiction, and newspapers instead of passive, frivolous reading that most Singaporeans are usually involved in.

Schools have a key role to play in helping Singapore augment her reading population so that her people can better appreciate and immerse themselves in the country's literary scene – one that is active, rich and diverse. The objective of EFSS's ER programme is therefore to give students access to a wide range of local and international literature and publications so that they can choose what they want to read and enjoy the process of reading. This interest and enjoyment will motivate students to seek out more books, allowing them to repeatedly experience the pleasures of reading, leading to sustained motivation.

Apart from addressing what our students are reading, we should also be concerned about how they read. Much of the reading students do on the Internet is superficial and information driven. According to Dooley (2015), screen-based reading behaviour is characterized by browsing and scanning, keyword spotting, one-time reading, non-linear reading, and selective reading. These readers also demonstrate decreasing sustained attention. A growing body of evidence suggests that digital reading may be less engaging and satisfying, even for digital natives. In contrast, print material cultivates deep reading – one that is slow, immersive, rich in sensory detail and emotional and moral complexity. Deep reading is a distinctive experience that protects readers from distractions and allows them to be attuned to the nuances of language. Their reading is enriched with reflection, analysis, their own opinions and an intimate relationship is established with the author (Paul, 2013).

In the light of this, this ER programme focuses on getting students to engage in the regular reading of print literature, for them to acquire the ability to read at a deeper level in order to apprehend and appreciate the works of literature.

Strategies

Providing access to a wide range of texts

Very often, teachers worry about giving students too much autonomy in what they read, for fear that they do not make good choices. To address this concern, students should have access to a well-stocked library of books of every genre, across different disciplines. In the beginning years when EFSS started, teacher representatives from all departments were involved in the selection of books for the school library. Teachers spent hours at Books Kinokuniya

picking out the books they would like to read, as well as those they thought students would be interested in. Such a selection process had the advantage of ensuring that the titles were not narrowly confined to the preferences of a few individuals from the languages departments. Instead, the titles procured covered a range of genres, disciplines, subject areas and included graphic novels and hobby-related books. The result is a comprehensive range of literature, by both local and international authors, to cater to the varied reading interests and personalities of our students.

Allowing students a voice and choice in their reading

The joy of reading comes with empowering the reader. Instead of mandatory, prescribed texts, students should be reading what interests them instead of what is being assigned to them (Martin, 2016). Being excited about what they are reading motivates students to extend their reading on a particular topic, which in turn deepens their knowledge and understanding. At EFSS, students are given free rein to select books and magazines of their choice during the library visits and also to bring their own books to read during the assigned reading period.

Recommending interesting and level-appropriate materials

To avoid confusion and frustration, students have to read materials that are interesting and within their levels of proficiency. This would allow their enthusiasm and confidence in reading to grow (Day & Bamford, 1998; Leung, 2002). Having access to a wide range of books and being empowered to make their own choices do not necessarily ensure that students will be excited about reading. Beginning readers often face the challenge of where to start and what to

choose. Hence, a list of recommended titles or authors for different levels of proficiency would serve as a helpful guide for amateur as well as seasoned readers. In coming up with this list, input can be sought from various sources: the national library, reading lists of other schools, student readers of various proficiency levels, colleagues and friends with young children. The EFSS library also features a different theme at least once a term, and books related to the theme are shortlisted and displayed near the entrance to draw student attention.

Sanctioning time for students to engage with texts

Students need time and space to read and engage with texts authentically. At EFSS, students are encouraged to read before morning assembly and a weekly 30-minute 'Read' period is factored into the curriculum for lower secondary students to participate in sustained reading. During the 'Read' period, teachers bring their own books and participate in reading as well. During the post-examination period, more time is set aside for students to read in the school library during EL lessons. While we are well aware that 30 minutes a week is too limiting to contribute to a robust ER programme, it provides a good starting point for students to continue their reading at their own time after the 'Read' period.

Providing opportunities for students to talk about their reading

Apart from setting aside time for reading, opportunities for students to share their reading opinions and reflections with their peers allow them to see the value of reading. In addition to the 'Read' period, time is set aside for teachers and students to share what they have read, in small groups or in front of the class. The school has an 'Open Book Sharing' activity that takes place on

two Fridays each month, for 10 minutes after morning assembly. Classes are rostered for this activity and 1-2 students will either volunteer themselves or be nominated for the sharing. Students will recommend a book they have read and share noteworthy quotes and their reflections on the book. The class's EL teacher will conclude the sharing by linking the plot and reflections to a similar book he/she has read or/and to broader themes and draw relevance to the students' lives. These book recommendations are accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation with information on the title, author, ISBN, excerpts, quotes and reflections. The information is made available even after the book sharing, on LCD screens located around the school. The 'Open Book Sharing' aims to pique students' interest in the books their teachers and peers are reading, so that they can include more titles to their own reading lists.

Collaborating with the National Library Board (NLB)

The national library is another valuable resource that schools should tap to support their reading programmes. At EFSS, a librarian from NLB is invited to make book recommendations at least once a semester. To extend the range of titles available for students, EFSS collaborates with NLB to bring in additional titles at least once a semester on designated days. Classes are then rostered to visit the library to browse through the titles brought in by NLB and borrow books that interest them. The school reading coordinators also work with the librarian to run a programme titled 'Wicked Reads' for one cohort of lower secondary students. This activity involves getting students to read an excerpt from a novel and working in groups on a couple of interesting post-reading tasks. The tasks include getting students to create a product and writing a simple sales pitch.

The aim is to allow students to see the relevance of reading to real-life applications and motivate them to read the rest of the novel. EFSS has also liaised with NLB to invite authors to talk about their writing and conduct creative writing workshops for interested students, as an extension to reading.

Designing interesting post-reading activities

In ER, the goal is for reading to lead to more reading and assignments will invariably kill the joy of reading. Reading is best learned through reading, and not through participation in reading-related tasks (Renandya, 2017). At EFSS, post-reading activities are assigned only during the holidays, to ensure that students continue to read without the supervision of their teachers. Some of the tasks include designing a book cover or poster that best illustrates the gist of the book, changing a particular scene or the ending of the story, describing and drawing a parallel with a character in the story they can identify themselves with.

Recognising students' efforts at reading

While we acknowledge that students should be intrinsically motivated to read, we find that there is little harm in providing some incentives to promote more reading as well as to applaud students' efforts in this lifelong endeavour. In addition to the tokens sponsored by NLB for the students, individuals and classes are awarded readership prizes (in the form of bookstore vouchers and stationery) as a form of recognition and encouragement to sustain their reading habit.

Impact on the learner

While the gains of ER on language learning are not easily quantifiable over the short

term (except for readership figures that are increasing steadily over the years), certain learner disposition and attitudes have been observed, which are gratifying. Overall, there is a general perception by teachers that students are exhibiting a greater readiness and interest in reading. Students read texts assigned to them in class with greater willingness and settle into reading relatively quickly during the 'Read' periods. Not surprisingly, new friendships have been forged over similar reading interests, leading to increased motivation as reading buddies spur each other on. Students also appear more confident and less inhibited in sharing their viewpoints and ideas during class and small group discussions.

Upcoming plans

Engaging with digital texts

In a digital age, despite studies showing that reading of print material might be superior to digital texts, technology and literacy should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. With the ER programme ensuring that students are regularly exposed to a wide range of literature in print, educators must ensure that readers of the 21st century are able to engage with digital texts as well. As stated by Dooley (2016), given the abundance of information online and the rate at which content is added and changed, technology and literacy have become closely connected. Technology can also serve as a good complement to reading. Schools should make provisions for learners to have access to a wide variety of reading material, in both print and digital forms, which will meet their personal learning needs and styles. This is aligned to our department's plan to develop multi-literacy skills in our students, through helping them to understand and engage with different types of multimodal texts.

Encouraging EL teachers to engage in ER

For EL teachers to be good role models for their students, they need to read widely themselves. ER not only helps with teachers' personal development, but also allows them to be better informed about their profession and the world around them. Teachers who are well-read can connect better with their students as their students find them more interesting and engaging (Maley, 2009). Time can be set aside during each department meeting for teachers to share the titles they have read or distribute interesting articles for their peers to enjoy. Alternatively, an online platform can be shared among teachers for them to share book titles and upload articles they find interesting. As students are always eager to find out what their teachers are reading, the EL teachers can take the lead by sharing a synopsis and reflection of books they have enjoyed reading on the LCD screens located around the school and/or have their sharing displayed in visible areas around the school.

Involving students in the selection of books

To give students more choice and voice in their reading, there are plans to involve readers across all levels and streams to participate in the selection of books for the school library. This will further broaden the range of titles and cater to the varied interests and proficiency levels of the students.

Conclusion

Our learners will not become readers overnight. Cultivating and sustaining a reading habit will definitely take time. Through reading, learners tap on their imaginative and creative faculties, develop critical and analytical thinking skills and have greater empathy for others. Educators must

therefore possess the strong belief and confidence that over time, ER will definitely improve the reading literacy and language proficiency of our students. Implementing and sustaining a successful reading programme requires strong support from school leaders, collaborative efforts among teachers and commitment from the learners.

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