A TYPOLOGY OF READING IN THE EFL CLASSROOM TYPES OF LEARNERS/READERS

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ABSTRACT: The article *A typology of reading in the EFL classroom. Types of readers* is adressed to language and communication teachers and is intended to provide an analysis of the different types of EFL readers, from the perspective of several various factors that can fundamentally influence our students' reading competences: age, gender, motivation, learning styles.

In his attempt to develop in his/her students' real, effective competences of accurate, fluent, comprehensive reading, the foreign languages teacher must be able to grasp all these similarities and differences and to efficiently use them within the EFL classroom.

The current educational context, based on the student- centred learning principle, makes it necessary to take into consideration all these individuality traits both when planning our teaching strategies and when selecting our materials or evaluation methods.

KEYWORDS: individual, similarities, differences, age, gender, motivation, learning style.

TYPES OF LEARNERS/ READERS

The aim of the current article is to draw a conceptual analysis of reading as psycholinguistic and learning process, focusing on the typology of readers from various and different perspectives.

„When a man does not know what harbour he is making for, no wind is the right wind". (Seneca)

In the learning-teaching interaction of any kind and at any level, including EFL, it is of paramount importance for educators to be aware of who their students are, what are their interests and needs, what they like or dislike, in one word what are the individual differences and similarities among the group of students.

As teachers we must always keep in mind that we must have a dual perspective of the way we rapport to our students: the whole class vs.

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individual students. We consider that in relation with developing reading skills it is especially important to have an overview of *individual learner differences*.

The class as a "learning community" is formed of individual, unique, rich, contrasting or similar personalities. It is important for the teacher to grasp these similarities or differences and use them constructively when he/she is going through the planning of his/her teaching session. It is obviously more challenging to address learner differences than the similarities, as they require a more individualised self-student approach on the part of the teacher.

Over the years of research on the topic, the following differences have been pointed out as being influential over effective language learning:
- Age
- Gender
- Personality traits
- Cognitive ability
- Cognitive development stage
- Socio-economic status
- Preferred learning styles and strengths
- Educational background
- Language proficiency level
- Motivation

In view of our research goal, we tried to narrow down this list to the following individuality traits which we consider as being more related to reading competency:
- age
- gender
- motivation
- learning styles

I. Age

Since we are discussing ways of developing reading skills, the age factor and the differences it implies can be determining for the way we build up our teaching. Thus we must take care of some issues as: – choosing interesting, age appropriate content; – supplementing the content with riddles, anecdotes, tongue-twisters or any of the kind which will stir-up the students' interest; – dividing and pacing the content so as to meet the

students own learning rhythm; – setting clear, explicit tasks and providing any additional resources.

The age factor and its influence over language learning at large and reading in a foreign language in particular has widely been debated among the specialized literature, and the points of view are quite varying and contradictory. Most of the authors favour the idea that younger learners (children and teenagers) are more likely to acquire a second language faster and easier that adult learners. This view relies on the nativist theory of learning and stems from one reality – based observation: if exposed to a language – immersion situation young children pick up and absorb the local language more naturally and easier than grown-ups. This is most obvious in the case of pronunciation. The earlier a child is exposed to the study of a foreign language, the more likely he/she is to develop a native – like pronunciation and accent.

Some other researchers (Singleton, 1989; Ellis, 1994) stance the contrary: if given the same conditions and opportunities, older learners will acquire FL as effectively as younger ones.

Since the scope of our study is with English language learners from elementary to intermediate level we are going to centre on some considerations about working with young learners – children and teenagers.

Teaching English to children (6 to 12 years old)

When addressing this age group, we consider as an appropriate starting point the idea that young learners should have fun with English and that we, as teachers, have to immerse our content and our teaching strategies into their childhood universe, one which is particularly centred on play, amusement, curiosity and self-discovery.

To be able to do that we need to discriminate what is specific about young learners and the way they rapport to learning in general and language learning in particular.

– Children are more enthusiastic, active and engaged in the learning process. They usually proceed better with their learning if they are exposed to a direct, active interaction with the immediate environment. The teaching should thus focus on hands-on activities and gradual exploration (drawing, cutting – and – matching, dancing, etc.)

– Children are frequently more socially involved with their group and therefore they learn better through social interaction, be that with their

peers or with the teacher. This is why assisted pairwork and groupwork is important at this age, as it allows them to practise both communication and team- skills. The teacher also needs to consider organizing the classroom space and his/her choice of activities to allow children to combine physical activities with more intellectual ones.

– Children learn effectively when there is a scaffolding of their tasks directed by the teacher. Since children have a shorter attention span than adults it is important then to have predictable, rehearsed classroom routines, to make use of short activities, to vary them frequently, to give clear and simple instructions. When the children are actually performing a task, a breaking of that task into step-by-step stages is essential as well as keeping the children focused and guiding them on.

– Children learn through effective discovery and they are more interested in the physical and the tangible, the physical world being dominant at all times.

Young learners do not have a consolidated meta-language and then language should be taught holistically and rehearsed and reinforced by much oral repetition and activities that will involve different physical and mental skills as well.

In what regards introducing and developing basic reading skills and strategies to young learners, teachers should pay attention to all the above mentioned age characteristics and design their teaching following the guidelines below:

• Use supplementary resources such as brightly coloured visuals, and realia (toys, puppets, masks, word cards, posters, objects etc.). They can be teacher-provided or created by the children themselves. These can help make the language input easier and more comprehensible.

• Incorporate physical movement within the lesson, creating a controlled balance between quiet and noisy activities. TPR and miming activities are favoured at this age.

• Organize the content in well-structured themes, usually closely-related to their universe: family, friends, animals, houses, shopping, etc. Information from other school subjects or children literature can also be included. It is a good idea to use thematic unit planning in order to build a larger context in which students can learn and use the language.

• Use riddles, chants, songs, stories as much as possible as they are defining of their childhood. Stories could be the simplest, fastest and most

effective resource for language exposure with young learners. Stories can be read or told by the teacher and it is recommended to supplement them with clear, colourful eye-catching pictures. The teacher's choice for materials or themes should consider the children's familiarity with them; they should belong to their immediate universe.

• Use mother-tongue when necessary, without relying to much on it, especially with more complicated expressions in L2 or complex task directions. Although teachers these days are encouraged to apply the "English only" rule, with young learners especially, using the mother tongue becomes imperative in certain situations when there is a limited amount of time or a mixed level class.

Teaching English to teenagers (13–16 years old)

> ***Motto***: „If you can teach teenagers, you can teach anyone".
>
> (Michael Grinders)

There is indeed a general opinion among teachers and theorists that teenagers are the most challenging and overwhelming group to teach.

As it is the age of trespassing from childhood to adulthood there are in a teenager's life a lot of transformations, of challenges, that the class teacher must address with care:

– a relatively low level of self-confidence about themselves and their relation to the world

– strong and contradictory emotions

– a quite reduced focus/concentration span; their interests are constantly changing

– rejection of some type of activities which they feel are embarrassing; they are a lot more inhibited than younger children

– a lot harder to motivate especially as response to an imposed, not chosen school subject

– rebellious and always challenging authority and requirements, hence the frequent discipline or organisational issues, sometimes mingled with refusal, rudeness, answering back.

Quite frightening indeed! And yet, in the hands of the skillful teacher, any of these age characteristics can be modelled and reversed into advantages. All we have to do is follow the track of their complex personality and respond to their demanding needs:

• Teenagers are in a constant search for authenticity, for the real, life-like things. It is important that what they learn has a meaning and relevance for their own person. Questions like: "Why do I have to do this? How is it going to help me?" are frequent and so the teacher should give pertinent, clear explanations for all his choices or tasks and personalize them.

• Teenagers are quite preoccupied with their image in front of others, with their position within the group and also keen on close relationships. So it is important that we involve them in PW/GW or in projects of lower or larger extent, in extra-school activities, competitions etc.

• Teenagers' interests are immediate ones, they love to learn about the newest things around them, so our selection of materials should always be an updated one, relevant for their universe: magazines, websites, recent movies, music, etc. One good way to do that is to let them suggest materials or activities they would prefer.

• Teenagers appreciate firm but fair teachers, who are always preoccupied with their students, especially on an individual basis. As it is the age of egocentrism, we should try, as possible, to include all our students, not leaving anyone isolated.

• Teenagers love to show off in front of friends or any audience and this could be used to perform acting activities, such as: role-play, student-theatre, dramatizing stories, debate/ public speaking competitions etc. They can thus express themselves creatively and meaningfully. Still, we should avoid imposing this type of activities on the shy students who do not want to be in the spotlight.

• Teenagers are passioned by music and the "freshest hits" as a means for their own deep inner feelings. So we should include working with songs and song lyrics as much as possible.

• Teenagers are independent and outgoing. It would not do any harm to pass them the control of the class from time to time – choice of materials, of methods, of assessment.

• Teenagers have a lot of knowledge about diverse aspects of their proximate universe. It is thus useful to activate all this information and encapsulate it within the lesson.

• Teenagers are competitive and in search of challenges. Games, competitions, class presentations could answer this preference, thus stimulating their interest.

II.2.b.2. Gender

The term as we intend to approach it in view of this paper is more related to differences within class behaviour or differences of perspective towards language learning. Thus refered, gender conveys a social variable of the EFL learner which guides his learning; it is a set of learned, rather than inherited attitudes of the individuals.[2]

Goddard and Patterson[3] pointed out some differentiating characteristics of boys vs. girls.

Males are seen as "logical, rational, aggressive, exploitative, strategic, independent and competitive" whereas females are defined as "intuitive, emotional, submissive, empathic, spontaneous, nurturing, and cooperative".

Starting from these considerations and after having reviewed a number of research studies we may try to draw a parallel analysis of how gender issues function within the EFL classroom.

Since one main personality trait of boys is competitiveness, the type of classroom activities they prefer are the competition-oriented ones which enhance their tendency for spatial skills and which develop within strict time limits, for example debates or yes/no answering contests. As far as reading materials are the issue, boys' interests focus on science, sports, cars, danger and adventure. As type of language outcomes they are more favourable of drawing lists, completing diagrams and charts.

Girls are more verbally-oriented, in all 4 skills, and have a preference for the co-operative classroom type. They have a larger perspective on classroom activities, going from IW/PW/GW to complex project work, organizing portfolios, creating colourful board presentations. Their main reading subjects cover more humanities-oriented topics: magazine articles about important people, fashion, family life, fairytales, lifestyle. They are more tolerant with diverse classroom interaction and have a more positive attitude towards language learning and tasks accomplishment.

II.2.b.3. Motivation

Motivation is a theoretical construct used to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence and quality of behaviour, especially goal-directed behaviour. (Maehr&Meyer, 1997)[4]

2 Graddol and Swan (1989):*Gender Voice*, Oxford, Blackwell.
3 Goddard, A. and Patterson, M. (2000): *Language and Gender*, London, Routledge, p. 32.
4 Mehr, M. & Meyer, A.(1997): "Understanding Motivation and Schooling", in

According to Dumitriu Gheorghe and Dumitriu Constanta[5], motivation can be defined as "a fundamental dimension of human personality, an internal, inherent variable aiming to support the individual's knowledge acquisition process and his/her psychological competencies. [...] Motivation is the ensemble/sum of internal, motives, needs, reasons, tendencies, interests, intentions, convictions, aspirations, dreams, goals and ideals – which innately support the individual in his attempt to achieve specific actions and attitudes".

This is a rather global view of motivation encompassing all possible human activities which are motivation-triggered.

Following we are going to break the term up with regard to our specific goal, that of establishing the complex relationship between motivation and EFL reading efficiency.

Various studies that have dealt with motivation in relation to FL learning provide several perspectives and categorizations of the term.

1. Gardner and Lambert[6] proposed a distinction between "integrative" and "instrumental" motivation. The former applies to the learner's wish to become part and identify with a specific target- language group – as it is the case with immigrants. The latter is triggered by the learners' purpose or interest to learn the language as a facilitator vehicle for study or career promotion.

2. Brown (1987)[7] distinguished three types of motivation connected to learning:

– "global" motivation which encapsulates the individual's previous educational achievements as well as various social background factors.

– "situational" motivation-stemming from the learning context (classroom seating and interaction, time of the day, tiredness, relaxation or anxiety of the student)

– "task" motivation – probably the one type which is most closely related to the teacher's role of making tasks and activities as attractive and engaging as possible.

Educational PsYchology Review, 9, pp. 371–380.

5 Dumitriu, Ghe, Dumitriu, C.(2004): *Psihopedagogie. Curriculum Suport pentru Examenele de definitivat/ gradul II*, București, EDPP, p. 64.

6 Gardner, R. and Lambert, W. (1972): *Atittudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning,* Rowley, Newburry House, p. 284.

7 Brown, H, D. (1987): *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, Eaglewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, p. 216.

3. The third way in which motivation is conceptualized is as "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" motivation.

– Intrinsic motivation is internally related to the learners' wishes, self-esteem, inner beliefs and attitudes, personal expectations and judgements regarding language learning.

– Extrinsic motivation is highly influenced by external variables, many of which can come under the control and adjustment of the teacher. Some others exceed the teacher's influence: parents' authority, group influence, long-term examinations goals.

Anyway, regardless of these motivational categories, what the teacher should hold as prevailing conviction is that motivation exists within every individual student; it just needs to be sparked and nurtured. Language learning motivation can increase or decrease gradually as the students' needs and interests change, by means of progress, or in other cases regress. It is for the teacher to find ways and incentives to restimulate his/her students' motivation.

Motivation incentives are numerous and dependent on our students' age, but on the whole they all have to do with the teacher's skillfulness in organizing and presenting his content, in conducting his classroom management, in providing fair, effective feedback.

Children are easier to motivate than teenagers or even more adult learners. They will usually try to please the teacher and remain within the group's standards; they bring their natural innate enthousiasm for play and discovery; they are curious and inquiring. All these are motivational sparks which the teacher has to constantly maintain by:

– use of realia, flashcards, stories, songs, games meant to facilitate their acquiring of new vocabulary or grammar structures.

– engaging them in creative, artistic tasks of their own (drawing, painting, clipping) and value the results of their work by means of class or school exhibitions, class sharing of the outcomes.

– integrating role- play and other drama activities – miming for example – which add variation to the lesson and involve even the less motivated learners.

– stimulate their concentration and interest span by means of PW and GW at they enhance an easier and quicker acquisition of language input through co-operation and communication.

– choosing a seating arrangement that will always ensure eye contact, both teacher to student and student to student. Many theorists favour the horseshoe shape.

– Error correction and feedback should reinforce encouragement and self-determination; teachers should keep a balance between the extremes – overemphasising of either success or failure would be undermining for the students motivation. Noticing the young learners' success and rewarding it somehow will be quite motivating, as the teacher is an important figure to them.

Adolescents can be more challenging for the teachers in terms of motivation and interest stimulation. Curiosity is no longer such an urging engine and the teacher's approval does not hold the same importance. What becomes more valuable for them at this age is peer approval and the fear of the group isolation or humiliation and the teacher should engage these two aspects constructively. For the rest we have already listed some ideas for working with adolescents which can also determine keeping their interest alive. To conclude we chose one of William Littlewood's [8] stances about motivation:

„In second language learning as in every other field of human learning, motivation is the critical force which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all, how much energy he devotes to it, and how long he perseveres. It is a complex phenomenon and includes many components: the individual's drive, need for achievement and success, curiosity, desire for stimulation and new experience, and so on. These factors play a role in every kind of learning situation".

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8 Littlewood, W. (1997): *Foreign and SL Learning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 47.