Reading Syndicates: A Working Model for the Language Classroom

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A classroom model is proposed for developing an interest in reading for pleasure and increasing literary competence amongst intermediate or advanced language students. The relevant background to the teaching and learning situation in which this scheme was elaborated is outlined, and reasons given for wanting a more sophisticated wide-reading programme than the traditional class reader. At the heart of the article is a detailed model showing the mechanics involved in implementing a reading syndicate web, with examples of texts which have been used successfully. The article concludes by enumerating perceived advantages of such a system and suggesting possible adaptations in different teaching situations.

BACKGROUND TO THE TEACHING SITUATION

The term ‘reading syndicate’ may well be unfamiliar to you, though whether or not it constitutes a new coinage I am unaware. According to Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary, a syndicate may be defined as “a combination of persons for some common purpose or interest”. In the case of the reading syndicates I propose to describe, the common purpose is for a small group of students to read collectively a certain number of literary texts and share their individually acquired knowledge and appreciation to enhance the overall group level of literary awareness.

The circumstances which prompted the development of this reading scheme, though certainly not unique, are sufficiently unusual to merit elucidation. In August 1983, 1984 and 1985, groups of fifteen Malaysian teenagers, sponsored by their Ministry of Education, arrived at Marjons (The College of St. Mark and St. John) in Plymouth to embark on a six-year programme which would take them through matriculation in English language and literature and general studies after two years, and on to a four-year B.Ed degree course. They would graduate after six years in England as teachers of English as a foreign language, destined to return to the state education system in Malaysia. These students arrived with Malaysian ‘O’ level passes, including English of course, though all subjects except English had been taught through the medium of Bahasa Malaysia. Whilst most of them displayed considerable confidence and aptitude in oral and aural skills, there were clearly large gaps in their reading and writing skills at an academic level appropriate to the demands of their course. One such area of weakness was with regard to exposure to literary texts in English. The Malaysian ‘O’ level does not require any study of English literature, and the students’ own tastes tended towards the popular

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press, romantic fiction and lurid war comics. Set against this background was the knowledge that within two years they would find themselves in undergraduate seminars tackling the greats of English literature alongside British students whose literary competence had been developing continuously throughout their school careers. Although it was impossible to make up that deficit, some initiative was clearly required to cultivate more sophisticated literary tastes and to expose these students to a wide range of worthwhile reading in English.

As part of the matriculation course, they were required to study six literary texts in some depth, producing ‘A’ level-type essays and taking a summative literature examination. The texts selected for study were as follows:

- *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell
- *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe
- *A Passage to India*, E.M. Forster
- *Lord Jim*, Joseph Conrad
- *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, Peter Shaffer
- *Nine Modern Poets*, Black (Ed.)

These were all very respectable texts for study at advanced level and by no means a ‘soft option’. However, to compound the difficulty, these students — with no historical or literary framework within which to situate author or text, no yardstick against which to measure goodness or greatness — inevitably proved very wary of offering personal critical judgments and initially were heavily reliant on the teachers’ notes and commentary.

**READING SYNDICATES IN PRACTICE**

The notion of reading syndicates therefore evolved as a way to deal with a number of the difficulties these students faced. How then do reading syndicates work in practice? The initial step is the selection of texts which will be of interest to the students and, preferably, of some literary merit, without being too difficult in terms of either ideas or style. The selection I made to introduce these students to the scheme was as follows:

- *The Pearl*, John Steinbeck
- *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway
- *Hiroshima*, John Hersey
- *The Diary of Ann Frank*

I then ordered four copies of these five books, fifteen in all to be distributed to the students and five to be retained as teachers’ copies. The syndicate system requires that a class be broken up into small component groups, each of which is termed a syndicate, and whose prime responsibility is to read the given texts within a given
time limit. I divided my class into three syndicates, each comprising five students and within which I tried to ensure a balance of linguistic ability, sex and vulnerability. The students then sat together in their newly-formed groups whilst I presented a sales pitch for each of the books listed above. I made it clear that these books were not to be read as potential examination texts, but for pleasure and with a view to communicating the contents to other members of their syndicate. The five books were then handed out to each of the three syndicates. After a certain amount of horse-trading, every member of the class was in possession of a book which they wanted to read. I then noted down which students across the three syndicates had chosen the same book. As this stage a fairly intricate web begins to emerge. For the sake of clarity this web is perhaps best represented diagrammatically.

Fig 1: Model Selection of Books within Syndicates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Syndicates</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>The Old Man and the Sea</td>
<td>The Diary of Ann Frank</td>
<td>The Old Man and the Sea</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Hiroshima</td>
<td>Hiroshima</td>
<td>The Pearl</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>The Pearl</td>
<td>Walkabout</td>
<td>The Diary of Ann Frank</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>The Diary of Ann Frank</td>
<td>The Pearl</td>
<td>Walkabout</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Walkabout</td>
<td>The Old Man and the Sea</td>
<td>Hiroshima</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 2: Cross-syndicate Groupings by Books Chosen

The Pearl: 1C, 2D, 3B
The Old Man and the Sea: 1A, 2E, 3A
Walkabout: 1E, 2C, 3D
Hiroshima: 1B, 2B, 3E
The Diary of Ann Frank: 1D, 2A, 3C

Dates were given for tutorials to be held on each of the books, involving the three students from across the syndicates who had selected the same book to read. These were spaced at one every two weeks so that, in some cases, students had up to two months in which to read their book. As will be observed from the diagrams, the tutorials bring together three randomly grouped students, linked only by their choice of reading matter. In the tutorial sessions students may retell the story to the tutor, seek clarification of difficult vocabulary or incidents, offer or find out information about the background to the text or author, discuss the themes, characters, symbols and the impact the book made on them. The tutorials thus allow students who have shared analogous reading experiences to pool their ideas and see them corroborated or developed by their peers and the tutor. Clearly, they provide a useful introduction to a type of learning situation students encounter at undergraduate level, and permit the shyer students to speak with more confidence as they find themselves in a small and supportive group.
The next stage, known as the feedback session, is where the reading syndicates really come into their own. A few days after the tutorial, time is set aside for the three student readers to recount their reading experience to the other four members of their syndicate. This has usually been a highly successful and enjoyable experience. Most people take pleasure in telling stories and, equally, enjoy listening to them — as long as they are well told. Characters need to be well drawn, the sequence of events clearly presented, historical background and changes in time-scale filled in. Very often, listeners will interrupt to seek further clarification or egg the narrator on to reach the climax more quickly. All tutors involved in this scheme have found that, after initial guidance and prompting in the art of story-telling, syndicates have found the teacher’s presence obtrusive and distracting. Correction of language errors at this stage would be quite inappropriate and, apart from supplying a few factual details, the teacher is probably best advised to let the group work proceed without intervening. The very real information gap between narrator and listeners, accompanied by high motivation on both sides to close it, ensures that strategies evolve for the negotiation of meaning and for information to be exchanged.

Two further stages are involved which cement the corporate nature of the effort. First, with the tutor’s guidance, the tutorial group selects a passage from their book for use with the whole class as reading comprehension. This may involve situating the extract within the text as a whole (again calling upon the specialist knowledge of the student-readers), looking at character portrayal, aspects of an author’s style, humour and irony, similarity or contrast with other texts studied. This stage, it might be noted, can easily lead into some form of creative writing, set as homework.

The final stage is for the three readers to prepare independently a summary/review of their chosen book for submission to the tutor and then for inclusion in reading syndicate files, which are corporate files containing the various reviews of each member of a syndicate. In this way, at the end of the two-year matriculation programme, each syndicate should have read collectively about thirty different books. Of this number each individual student will have read and discussed at least six complete books, and have some familiarity with the plot, characters and style of all thirty.

**ADVANTAGES OF THE READING SYNDICATE**

Reading syndicates may appear a somewhat complex and time-consuming way of ensuring that students engage in wider reading. Experience at Marjons however, where three years of students have now gone through the matriculation course and the reading syndicate experiment, has shown that both tutors and students find this constantly changing learning web very rewarding. Indeed the advantages of such a system over traditional class readers or lists of recommended reading are worthy of mention. Class readers involve the purchase of a complete set of the same book on
the assumption that this one book will be suitable for all members of the class. Invariably, some students will fail to respond to the text and are demotivated by the prospect of having to read it. Equally, with all students reading the same book at the same time there is no genuine information gap, except in the understanding of lexical items or plot details. With class readers, classroom interaction tends to be largely teacher/student, whereas in the syndicate system endless permutations of student/student interaction are possible, with the roles constantly shifting as students form new tutorial groups or take their turn as narrators and knowers. As already indicated, the information gap is very large and very real, and the person narrating a story to their syndicate is often at great pains to persuade the listeners that the book in question is well worth reading. After a feedback session the books usually change hands, with some of the listeners going off to read the texts for themselves.

Lists of recommended reading have the obvious shortcoming that they can be easily ignored if there is no monitoring of what students actually read. The syndicate system ensures that books must be read in order to satisfy the tutor and not to disappoint the peer group. Motivation is high because, within limits, each student has selected a book they want to read, and the syndicates thereby provide a much more individualised approach to guided reading for pleasure than does the class reader.

Since this scheme has been developed in splendid isolation in the south-west of England I have, of necessity, drawn very much on my own experience. However, it seems to me that this pattern of reading and integrated skills is eminently reproducible, albeit with some modifications, both in more mainstream EFL situations and, indeed, in the mother tongue classroom. The books chosen need not all be literary, nor need they be complete texts (a selection of graded readers could well be used in intermediate classes). The key to the success of such a venture is, I believe, clear-headed planning and classroom management together with a feel for what your students might like to read. As for all the reading involved on the part of tutors, the syndicate system can provide a sound reason for reading or rereading a number of old favourites, purely for pleasure.

Appendix

List of books used effectively in the Marjons reading syndicate programme:

_The Pearl_, John Steinbeck
_The Old Man and the Sea_, Ernest Hemingway
_Hiroshima_, John Hersey
_The Diary of Ann Frank_
_No Longer at Ease_, Chinua Achebe
_Cider with Rosie_, Laurie Lee
My Family and Other Animals, Gerald Durrell
Down and Out in Paris and Lonon, George Orwell
The Small Woman, Alan Burgess
Lord of the Flies, William Golding
The Chrysalids, John Wyndham
All Creatures Great and Small, James Herriot
The Kon-Tiki Expedition, Thor Heyerdahl
Kes, Barry Hines
Billy Liar, Keith Waterhouse
Cry, the Beloved Country, Alan Paton
The African Child, Camara Laye
Burmese Days, George Orwell
The River Between, James Ngugi
The Great Gatsby, Scott Fitzgerald
The Loneliness of the Long-distance Runner, Alan Sillitoe
The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Sue Townsend
The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, Muriel Spark
The Wind in the Willows, Kenneth Grahame
One Day in the Life of..., A. Solzhenitsyn
Swami and Friends, R.K. Narayan
Brave New World, Aldous Huxley
Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad
Brighton Rock, Graham Greene
The Invisible Man, H.G. Wells
The Prussian Officer and other stories, D.H. Lawrence
Amadeus, Peter Shaffer
Kiss Kiss, Roald Dahl