Facing The Challenge Of Teaching And Learning EFL Reading: Beyond The Language Of Critique

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This article summarizes my experience with the challenge of teaching EFL reading in Morocco. To meet this challenge, I focused not only on my ability to teach effectively and make sound pedagogical decisions (language of critique), but also on my ability to defend these pedagogical decisions in front of administrators and colleagues (language of possibility). I argue that in addition to having a comprehensive theory of the learning-teaching process, a rich instructional repertoire and a clear understanding of the nature of reading and teaching/learning to read, we also need teachers who are not only critical intellectuals but transformative intellectuals as well. We need teachers who are able to change and reconstruct their own realities through sound pedagogical practice and effective leadership. The article provides an example of such leadership by describing how and why I created classroom libraries and founded the Regional Resource Center of English (RRCE) in a small Northern town in Morocco, as an attempt to face the challenging aspects of teaching EFL reading in my country. The article also provides a description of the social context of EFL literacy among other literacies in Morocco as well as a description of different uses of EFL literacy among EFL learners and teachers in the RRCE.

INTRODUCTION

“It’s Saturday 6:00 a.m. I’m on the bus, on my way to the capital city. It’s a five-hour drive. I have to be there before 12:00 a.m. Under normal circumstances Saturday is my day off. Yet, instead of going to the beach or enjoying the family gathering, I’m going to get some 1000 books and reading materials for the Regional Resource Center (RRCE). Nobody forced me to do this. This trip to Rabat is not part of my job description, either. So, why am I doing this?” I wondered. Before answering this question and in order to tell the whole story, let’s define what I mean by “language of critique” and “language of possibility”. Then I will describe the setting, the characters involved in this story, its rationale, the problems, and its moral lesson.

THE LANGUAGE OF CRITIQUE AND THE LANGUAGE OF POSSIBILITY

According to Giroux (1992), when teachers are able to teach effectively and make sound pedagogical decisions, they use the language of critique, but when they are able to defend these pedagogical decisions in front of others, for example administrators and colleague, to bring about change, they use the language of possibility.

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THE SETTING

The story in this article happened in Morocco. The Moroccan sociolinguistic background is quite complex. Standard Arabic is the official language of the country. It is also the language of the mass media and school instruction. Moroccan Arabic is the mother tongue of most, if not all, Moroccans. Moroccan Arabic is the predominant spoken language used for informal everyday communication. Berber is the language of the earliest inhabitants of Morocco. It is spoken in three dialects: Tamazight, Tashelhit, and Rifi in the southern, middle, and northern parts of the country respectively.

In addition to Arabic with its two varieties and Berber with its three dialectal forms, French is learned as a second or third language and a second literacy when children enter third grade of primary school. French language and literacy proficiency becomes more important in high school and university where certain scientific subjects are still taught in that language (Wagner, 1993: 22-23). While French is introduced at the third grade in elementary schools, another foreign language is introduced at the first year of senior high school. In the first year of their senior high school, students need to take another foreign language. They can choose from Spanish or English or even, sometimes, German or Italian. The teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), which dates back to the 1960s, is planned, implemented, and evaluated - like any other subject area of the national k-12 curriculum - by the Ministry of National Education (MNE).

At the senior high school level, the nationally prescribed curriculum includes Arabic language and literature, French language, Social Studies, Math, Natural Sciences, Physics and Chemistry, Physical Education, Health Education, Civics, Foreign Languages, and other vocational and technical subjects. Both public and private senior high schools are supervised by the MNE and are required to teach the prescribed curriculum. The Lycée (French word for Senior High School), where I was teaching (henceforth Lycée SMBA), is a public senior high school. It is located in a small, but beautiful, seaside town in the North West of Morocco. Students in this school had a choice between EFL or Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL).

Because the town retains much of the Spanish touch from the period of colonization. This means that Spanish is also used to watch/listen to the Spanish TV and radio channels, read Spanish newspapers, books and magazines; and interact with tourists and local Spanish-speaking residents. However, more students take EFL than SFL. I taught EFL for seven years at Lycée SMBA. I always had third grade Arts classes (equivalent to 12th grade in the USA). Each class contained 35 students, sometimes more. There were other majors in SMBA in addition to the Arts major. These included Experimental Sciences, Mathematics, Physical Education, and Foreign Language. There were approximately 2000 students in my senior high school.

THE CHARACTERS

The classes I was teaching were composed mainly of students from low income families (80%, of whom 60% were male, 40% female) with a small minority (5%) from wealthy families. The rest (15%) were from the middle class. While the 5% are able to spend their summer holidays in London, more than 80% are not able to afford to buy a textbook. The textbook we were using, English in Life (EIL), was designed by the MNE and cost 30 Dirhams ($3) - a lot of money for a working class family. There were thirteen EFL teachers (3 female and 10 male) at Lycée SMBA, with different status and qualifications. Out of these 13 teachers 6 were doing their “service civil” (a service that all college graduates in Morocco must offer to the country).

RATIONALE

Literacy is defined in this article as a cultural phenomenon that can only be studied and adequately defined and understood within each culture and its social context (Wagner, 1993; Street, 1984). Wagner (1993), for example, considers literacy as both a social and an individual phenomenon. This means that some literacy social practices are shared among members of a given society and at the same time individuals possess some specific skills, attitudes, and learned behaviors that are involved in any literacy practice. Literacy and its cognitive consequences are also considered to be culture specific (Scribner & Cole, 1981).

The importance of the social milieu has also been emphasized in EFL/ESL literacy research. For example, Richék, List & Lerner (1989) define reading as a process of constructing meaning through dynamic interaction between the reader, the text, and the context of the reading situation. The context of EFL/ESL reading refers here to the environmental and social milieu of the readers, that is, their home, school, and social group. Wagner (1993) points out that different social groups may have different attitudes towards literacy. Wallace (1992) also stresses the importance of the social milieu in EFL/ESL reading and learning to read. For example, in a society which has positive attitudes to literacy in general, learning to read is seen as a socialization process. The role of the environment or what is called literacy ecology (Wagner, 1993) or environmental print (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984) has been emphasized in literacy acquisition. The literacy ecology of EFL, in terms of environment of print and opportunities to use EFL, is really poor in my seaside town. Moreover, according to Wagner (1993:107), the socio-economic status of students has always been regarded as:
Other specific problems also existed. I had students who had negative attitudes towards EFL reading. I had students who would tend to focus on form rather than meaning while reading. I had students who would spend hours reading relatively short reading material, trying to pronounce and understand every single word. I had students who would resent reading simply because of the cultural shock they experienced while reading. I had students who held many misconceptions about what reading is.

I had also met and talked to some teachers who themselves were not readers and so could not serve as role models (Thomas, 1996; Arends, 1998). If we want to develop some effective literacy habits in our students one way to do this is to “practice what we preach” and read ourselves.

I worked with colleagues who would avoid being involved in any leadership function and limit themselves to the daily interactive functions of the classroom. For example, a colleague once told me “I don’t want to be a coordinator of EFL in this Lycée. I don’t want to be involved in any politics”. This same colleague added: “After all, I’m not supposed to do such job”. To avoid being caught in the web of extremes, teachers need to have a comprehensive theory and clear understanding of the process of teaching/learning EFL reading and the learning-teaching process as a whole in its social context. Teachers who have sound pedagogical knowledge and skills (i.e. using the language of critique) but do not engage in leadership functions are limited; whereas, those who engage in leadership functions (i.e. using the language of possibility) without a solid pedagogical ground have a handicap (Giroux, 1992).

FACING THE CHALLENGE: THE LANGUAGE OF CRITIQUE

The above problems seem to make EFL reading challenging for both teachers and learners. So, how can they meet this challenging aspect of reading in their attempt to teach or learn how to read?

To answer this question, any methodological approach has to be based on a comprehensive theory of the teaching-learning process in general as well as the EFL reading process in particular. Informed practice facilitates these processes (Ellis, 1994; Brown, 1980; and Fanselow, 1992). My informed practice and pedagogical approach is described in the section that follows:

To treat some problem-readers and poor reading habits that I noticed during my teaching, I adopted an informed pedagogical approach that included a variety of activities to overcome the challenging aspects of reading and to treat emerging problems. These activities aimed to:

- encourage learning to read by reading and through the teacher’s engagement and enthusiasm towards reading and writing in EFL;
present comprehensible, meaningful, and purposeful reading material that was of interest to the readers;

- encourage learners to use their background knowledge and build their self-confidence in reading;
- lower readers' anxiety;
- encourage reading in meaningful units instead of reading word by word;
- encourage prediction and guessing;
- create a purpose for reading by using task-based and problem-posing/solving activities;
- encourage cooperative learning by using small group work and pair work in reading;
- encourage readers to approach the text in an integrative way, making predictions while interacting with it;
- encourage the use of reader-generated questions;
- prepare the learners for the reading of authentic materials;
- improve and raise the learners' awareness of their reading speed;
- bridge the gap between the kind of background knowledge the text presupposes and what the learners actually know; and
- integrate reading with other language modes.

To integrate EFL reading with other language modes, The Official TEFL Guidelines of 1994 emphasize the fact that when extensive EFL reading is taught in Morocco, it is supposed not only to develop fluency in reading and promote acquisition, but also to develop other skills as well, especially writing. Reading and writing are viewed as shared knowledge, that is, what we know about reading and the way we comprehend a text is similar to the way we compose it (Carson, 1993; Kroll, 1993). Carson views reading and writing as transactions among readers, writers, texts, and cultures, that is, readers think about writers in constructing meaning and writers consider readers' needs. To integrate these two skills, Carson suggests the use of summaries and synthesizing texts. Like Carson, Kroll emphasizes the fact that writing is integrally connected to reading in several ways.

Zamel (1992) criticizes the transmission model of ESL/EFL reading which focuses on making students identify and retrieve a set of ideas from a text, denying both the reader's right to interact with the text and their critical understanding of the material. This static and receptive approach to reading, according to Zamel, influences the readers' writing skill as well, since readers are prevented from writing about their reading and expected to (re-) present the right set of ideas or correct interpretations. Zamel points out that both reading and writing are affected by purpose and goal and that both are interactive. She includes, among other pedagogical implications, the use of reading journals or logs as a method not only of integrating reading and writing but also for fostering reading and writing development.

Double-entry or dialogical notebooks provide another means for making students conscious of their reactions in ESL/EFL reading. This technique, which was presented by Berthoff in 1981, is explained in Zamel (1992). It consists of having students keep notebooks where they copy passages that have particular significance for them in one column, and then respond to them in the other. Another way of integrating reading and writing is by asking students to summarize what they have read and then reflect on it. Another possibility is to ask students to mark certain passages or insert marginal notations or reflective comments as they read, just as experienced readers often do, and then go back to those passages and explore in writing why they think these passages appealed to them. Students can also be asked to write down their predictions about what will happen in the text. In this way students are invited to see how reading involves active negotiation between reader, text, and context. Day (1993) provides activities that can be adapted to different levels and used for this purpose in different contexts. The reading workshop approach is another way of integrating reading and writing and overcoming the challenging aspects of teaching reading and learning how to read. This approach, as advocated by Atwell (1987), is based on the socio-psycholinguistic theory of reading and the whole language approach. It is a functional and flexible approach to create appropriate environments for learners to read and write.

**My Core Tenets**

In order to adopt and adapt the reading workshop approach in the EFL context, I considered the following conditions as advocated by Atwell (1987) and McAndrew (1993):

- **Learners should have ownership of their time.** This means that learners are given opportunities to make choices about how to spend their reading time.
- **The classroom environment must encourage reading as primary activity integrated with all other language modes.**
- **Teachers must demonstrate the importance of reading by reading, and showing enthusiasm and willingness to read and write.**
- **There must be opportunities for regular demonstrations of reading strategies, how to choose a book for example, depending on learners' needs.** There must
also be opportunities for sharing in the reading process, including responding to books, and for evaluating individual reading progress.

- The amount of time spent on reading/writing projects and the learning rate will vary according to different individuals’ levels and abilities.
- Reading achievement in the reading workshop should not be viewed in terms of books and papers being finished one after the other in a linear manner.

In addition to these conditions, there were five main components in my reading workshop. These were based on Reutzel and Cooter (1991):

1. **Sharing time**: The time when teachers and learners can share the new discoveries they have made in their self-selection and search for reading materials. The purpose of this sharing time is to create interest in various genres of reading materials.

2. **Mini-lessons**: These are short instructional sessions (about half an hour in length) for demonstrating reading strategies and preparing learners to read new material successfully and independently. Topics for mini-lessons are based on learners’ observed needs diagnosed during individual conferences. A mini-lesson aims at assisting learners to draw upon and use their prior knowledge to enhance comprehension.

3. **State-of-the-class**: Students use grids to indicate their daily activity and progress. A simple activity code can be used to indicate the daily status (e.g., CR = continue reading, NB = new book, TC = teacher conference, and BR = buddy reading). This procedure informs both the learner and the teacher of their responsibilities and progress during the workshop period. In fact, this procedure can be used to train learners to self-evaluate and check their learning.

4. **Self-Selected Reading**: During self-selected reading students may become involved in one or more activities. This is the major component of a reading workshop, because learners self-select the reading material, respond to what they read and what others read, and/or sign up for an individual conference with the teacher.

5. **Students’ sharing time**: As a closing activity students and teacher come together to share with the group the activities, books, poetry, etc., they have read.

The reading workshop can be adapted to various levels and contexts, including ESL/EFL contexts. This approach, like any instructional strategy, becomes more effective when used in the language of possibility. And this is what the rest of the story is about.

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**THE SHARED VISION AND THE LANGUAGE OF POSSIBILITY**

In addition to the above ‘informed’ pedagogical approach, I created classroom libraries with the collaboration of all learners. First, I shared “the vision” with my students. I tried to create what Peter Senge (1990) describes as “common vision” in his theory of leadership. Senge explains that when such vision is created

...people will continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns or thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continuously learning how to learn together.

(Senge 1990: 100)

Once the classroom learning community understood the rationale and goals behind the concept of classroom libraries, each member contributed with some reading material, be it a newspaper, magazine, a short story or a simple text. Examples of these materials included: Brochures on Islam (e.g., ‘Islam at a Glance’, ‘A Note on Fasting and Zakat Al Fitr’); books (e.g., ‘Women in Islam’, ‘The Spirit of Islam’), Newspapers (e.g., The Saudi Gazette); Magazines (News Week, Time). Most of this material came from outside the seaside town. As a community of learners, we tried to reach out to other resources beyond those found in our own town. For example, while some students wrote to other family members in different regions and received material in English, others brought what they found on a trip to the nearest big city (even if it was a picture or a simple text in English). As for me, I made my personal collection available as well. The organization and management of these libraries were done collaboratively. Students themselves kept records of reading materials and controlled the book exchange operation. I used to make sure that everybody was reading something by having students present orally to the whole class what they had read or just by sharing with me what they had read through summaries. All readers were given the opportunity to exchange and discuss some of their reading strategies so as to improve them. I also encouraged the learners to read about their own culture in order to help them understand other cultures. In fact, when they were given a free choice of topics, they came up with topics such as: Usury in Islam, The Concept of Hijjab, Women in Islam, Arabic Poetry, Fasting at Ramadan, and other social issues such as Poverty, and Homelessness in their own town. EEL, the prescribed textbook, did not provide materials to satisfy these needs and this spurred us on as a learning community gathering material relevant to our lives.

The technique of the classroom library resulted in the improvement of both the quality and quantity of reading of my students. One of my students observed, “Before having our classroom library, the classroom looked ugly. Now I have the feeling of really studying English”. She also explained that she felt like this because of “the ambiance the library created in the classroom”. This ambiance she added “pushed
me to read more". This effect has been noted before. For example, Brumfit (1983) noted that class libraries increase the amount of reading, which fosters fluency in reading. However, this may not happen unless learners are reading something comprehensible, interesting, and relevant to their lives in a non-threatening atmosphere both within and without the classroom.

To create such an atmosphere beyond the classroom in 1987 I founded the Regional Resource Center of English (RRCE) with the help of the school administration. This was made possible through the help of the Moroccan association of Teachers of English (MATE) and The US Information Service (USIS).

In order to make my idea for a RRCE a reality I had to explain to these institutions the importance of such a center. I had informal discussions with the concept with my colleagues during breaks in the staff room and in cafes. I also discussed the concept informally with the school director, who became convinced and supported the concept. Later, and in a formal way, I discussed the RRCE project with MATE and USIS through correspondence and meetings in the capital city. In short, I spoke both the language of critique and the language of possibility. As a result, I gained the support of my colleagues, the school administration, and other institutions to and the RRCE was born.

The RRCE was used for different purposes as is shown in the following statements made by both EFL students and teachers in Lycée SMBA. (All the names used here are pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes). For example, Fatima, a 3LM EFL student, made the following statement about her EFL literacy uses in the RRCE:

The RRCE allows me to do research in many topics for my homework and presentations in my English class. I sometimes translate some information and use it in other classes. I enjoy spending my free time in the RRCE because I can also play games in English, and listen to audiotapes in English in my free time.

Another student, Hatim, 3LM, explained:

The English center is a place where I can find books in English about different topics and where I meet other students and talk about things in English and Arabic. For example one day I wanted to do an oral presentation on Usury in Islam (the prohibition of money lending with interest). So I had to go to the English center where I found a whole book about Islam called "The Spirit of Islam".

Khalid, one of my students, told me how he used the RRCE:

I go there to look for information about British and American schools where I can go to do my undergraduate studies.

One of my colleagues, Abderraheem, a certified EFL teacher said:

Just the fact that EFL teachers in Lycée SMBA meet in the center during recess time and their free time is beneficial for us because we share ideas and help each other.

What Abderraheem is talking about here is what John Fanselow (1992) calls "contrasting conversations" that need to take place between and among professionals. In fact, it was Mahmoud, a qualified, experienced EFL teacher who remarked: "I really prefer spending recess time in the English center to in the Staff Room where I used to engage in useless gossip and trivial talk."

Another view of the use of RRCE is provided here by Allal, who was doing his service civil at Lycée SMBA. He said, "The RRCE provided me with teaching materials such as texts, tests, realia, readers, and authentic language sources such as newspapers, magazines, and listening material." Another "civiliste", Fouzia, explained her use of RRCE as follows: "Since I was preparing for my FSE and ENS entrance exam, I used some articles from the English Language Teaching Forum. I also had the opportunity to talk to experienced teachers about some activities and things that I can use in my classroom."

Finally I once witnessed in the RRCE what Wagner (1993) calls "mediators of literacy" a term that has much in common with the concept of "interpreter strategy" used by Baynham (1993) to describe the oral communicative practices of the Moroccan community in London. Baynham explains "one of the strategies used by adult members of the Moroccan community, in particular those whose competence in English is restricted, is the enlistment of an interpreter to accomplish a communicative purpose" (p. 296). Here is what happened in the RRCE:

There were about five students in the RRCE. They were all reading something. I was reading an article from the last issue of the English Language Teaching Forum when a sixth student came in. He came towards me and asked if he could talk to one of the five students. I agreed and let them talk together. After a minute or two the newcomer brought out an envelope and engaged in conversation with his friend. The two students were speaking Moroccan Arabic but they were talking about a letter that was written in English. It turned out that this letter was from a school in England. The student wanted to make sure whether he was accepted on their summer language program or not. I heard the other student interpreting for him that the school officials were asking for evidence of financial support and a statement from a bank.

These descriptions and statements about how the RRCE was used show that the RRCE became a major source of reading materials for the whole school learning community. It offered EFL learners and teachers an opportunity to become members of an EFL literacy club. It became a powerful means to develop EFL literacy and create a EFL "environment of print" in the Moroccan context, where interesting and meaningful EFL reading materials are sometimes hard to find. It provided opportunities for EFL learners and teachers to practice their EFL literacy not only for academic purposes - such as preparing for a test, a lesson, or an oral presentation
- but for real life purposes as well - such as getting admitted to an English summer program in Britain or searching for school addresses or a job. It also provided an opportunity for such literacy practices as interpreting and mediating of EFL literacy. In fact, both classroom libraries and the RRCE helped EFL learners achieve what Goodman (1986) calls "a sense of control and ownership over their own use of language and learning in school, over their own reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking, ... a sense of their potential power" (Goodman, 1986:10). When we help learners to develop their own literacy, we empower them to be in control of their learning for life and to become agents of change themselves. This is the ultimate goal of any critical pedagogy (Freire, 1997).

CONCLUSION: THE MORAL LESSON I LEARNED

This article has described some possible ways of meeting the challenge of teaching and learning to read in an EFL context. It was important not only to know what to teach and how to teach it, but also to know why we teach what we teach the way we teach it, as well. This means that teachers need to become not only critical intellectuals but transformative intellectuals too (Freire, 1997). Henry Giroux (1992) uses the term "language of critique" to refer to teachers' sound critical pedagogical knowledge and practices and the term "language of possibility" to refer to teachers' ability to change and reconstruct their realities through effective leadership. This requires teachers to defend their pedagogical decisions in front of administrators, colleagues, and other institutions. This, in turn, requires a clear understanding of what the nature of reading and learning to read is. So teachers need to develop a comprehensive theory not only of reading and writing, but also of the teaching-learning process as well. In other words, teachers need to be equipped with a rich repertoire of teaching strategies to deal with EFL reading problems such as the ones described in this article. The use of the reading workshop approach, classroom libraries, and RRCE are some of the tools that EFL teachers can use to face the challenge of EFL reading.

To establish both the RRCE in Lycée SMBA and the classroom libraries in my classrooms, I adopted a critical and informed pedagogical approach. I used both the language of critique and the language of possibility. Teachers need to speak these two languages effectively to face not only the challenge of teaching EFL reading, but also the daily challenges that often characterize our profession. I believe that in order to establish such balance we need to have a strong moral commitment to our profession, because "professionals don't need anybody to check on them, to push them, to lead them. They are compelled from within" (Brandt, 1992, p. 46). This is why I was on the bus to Rabat on a Saturday morning.

POSTSCRIPT

I was committed to the RRCE and it flourished. I left Morocco to do my doctorate in the USA. Over the years of my absence, it was difficult for my successors to maintain the moral commitment and use of language of critique and language of possibility required. Sadly, the RRCE eventually ceased to function. My purpose in writing this article is to help in bringing this RRCE back to life, and to promote the setting up of more resource centers such as that one in many places in the world to face the challenges of learning and teaching reading in a foreign language. Finally I also wish to underline the importance, when setting up such a center, of spending time and support on building a team committed to ensuring that the center continues and develops.

REFERENCES


