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Using Books in the Classroom:

Report from a reading project

Sonni Olsen



Finnmark University College

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Author: Sonni Olsen	Faculty:
Approved by: Ella Haukenes, Finnmark University College Marit Bjerkeng, Finnmark University College	
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Using Books in the English Classroom: Report from a reading project

SUMMARY

This article describes and summarises the findings of a book-based approach used with Norwegian learners of English. Three different age groups have participated over a period of three years. The youngest learners replaced textbooks for authentic children's books, whereas older learners also had additional material in the project period. The aim of the project was to find out if the use of literature would lead to increased motivation and learning.

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INTRODUCTION

The English language has become increasingly widespread in Norway over the last decade. It is now becoming a second language, as it is more used in public, for example in media and business. Some programs in higher education are also taught in English as part of the policy of internationalisation, making it possible for foreign students to come to Norway to study.

English is also the first foreign language learnt in Norwegian schools. The reform of primary education of 1997 included English as part of the curriculum from the beginning, which means that children start learning from the age of six. It seems, then, that Norwegian children are well prepared to use English as a second language as they grow up. However, the situation is not as clear. The situation for the language as a school subject is worrying to many teachers and parents. Children tend to lose motivation to learn English in school and seem to pick up most of their language from TV and computer games. The result is low language proficiency with a limited vocabulary and poor structural knowledge (Olsen 1998a). There is a need to look closely at ways to increase motivation for English in schools to ensure that young Norwegian school leavers will have the necessary foundation to use the language in education and professional situations.

Most teachers in primary and lower secondary school in Norway have their educational background from teacher education in university colleges, where English is not a compulsory subject. A political decision to make it a "forced" elective in the reform of 1998 was withdrawn before the first cohort of students reached that stage in their education. In 2003 a new reform is implemented which gives the opportunity to choose electives the two last years, and it remains to be seen whether this will make room for the choice of English for more students. It is important that more teachers choose English, as confident English teachers are more likely to create an inspiring learning environment and not trust all their teaching on

textbooks. Motivation to learn is the most important factor in any classroom, and as far as English is concerned, children have some knowledge and an interest in learning that we have to build on in our teaching. Exposing children to good books is in my opinion one way of doing it.

This paper describes a three-year project which introduces books written for children as tools for learning English as a second or foreign language. The aim of the project is to investigate whether extensive reading increases the motivation and learning effect concerning language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge. The learners are of three different age groups, and the books and working methods have varied accordingly. At all three levels the books picked out are good quality authentic books. The use of authentic text in language learning has become more and more common lately; also textbooks include excerpts of about 1 to 4 pages. But extensive reading of whole books gives learners the roughly tuned input needed to develop their new language (Krashen 1982). There are many good reasons for using “real” books written for children:

- Authentic texts provide real language in a cultural context. They give readers a more thorough understanding of the culture in which the language is used.
- Using books as material for structural tasks, for example by using the discovery technique for learning grammar, gives the lesson a meaningful content.
- Reading books promotes literacy and general learning skills, such as prediction and guessing meaning from context.
- Most children enjoy reading and motivate themselves for English.

The national curriculum for primary and lower secondary school includes examples of authentic texts to be used on all levels from rhymes and jingles in year 1 via fairytales and books for children to excerpts of Shakespeare’s plays and other classics in year 10. In spite of this, the use of literature instead of or in combination with textbooks is not very common. Some of the reasons are that books are thought of as too difficult, too expensive and too time-consuming. Most schools therefore provide their learners with textbooks that contain short text examples listed in the curriculum. These may inspire to further reading if books are available, but do not really give the amount of reading that promotes literacy. The results described in this paper show that the effects of more reading are clear in terms of increased understanding and proficiency. Also, reading books appears to increase motivation for English.

PARTICIPANTS

The first stage of this project was carried out with 9-10 year-olds. About 85 learners replaced textbooks with authentic texts in the form of modern books with illustrated stories that covered topics listed in the curriculum for English in year 4 (Olsen 2000). The second stage participants were about 40 pupils from two classes at two different schools, 7th year students at the age of 12 and 13 (Olsen 2001). In the third and last year, about 60 learners aged 14 and 15 took part in this book flood, reading books all through their 9th school year.

In all the three years there were control groups who did not read much literature, but who took the same pre-and post-tests. The teachers of the project classes took part in seminars on using books as tools for learning.

The level of proficiency ranged from complete beginners in the first year to quite advanced in the last year. All learners were exposed to books to suit their level, and the ways of using the books varied with the age groups.

METHODS

Working methods in the classrooms

The idea of a “book flood” has been tried in several countries, among them Fiji (Elley 1992), New Zealand (Elley 1989), England (Hafiz and Tudor 1983), Finland (Rønnqvist and Sell 1994) and Hong Kong (Yu et al 1994, Hong Kong Education Department 1998). The projects are of different size and the participants of various age groups, but the main idea is the same: In all the projects learners are exposed to large amounts of literature, and the aim is to achieve increased learning. In addition to increased general learning, results show that knowledge of vocabulary is developed, as well as the ability to understand text.

Used with younger learners, books will be **read aloud** in class to begin with, and also later to keep continuity and for social reasons. This is important, as it creates a good atmosphere when all learners take part in the same story. However, young learners can also start reading at an early stage and feel a great sense of mastering when finishing a book. There are a lot of possible activities that can accompany this reading, such as games, conversations or dramatisations that all stimulate children to use English words and phrases they have just met (or will meet) in the books. See Olsen (2000) for a description of some ideas.

In classes of older learners, who are considered to have a good reading capacity, books are mostly used for **individual reading**. An inviting display of books is kept in the classroom, and pupils sign out books on a list on the wall. The choice of book is free, but many pupils also seek advice from their teacher. The role of the teacher is one of facilitator and guide, which means that she should have an idea of the content and level of difficulty of the books in the classroom. It is important that the books are not too difficult, as they will not be completed. Not being able to finish a book may make the reader feel less confident or less interested in finding a new one. On the other hand, a simple book may be too childish and the reader will lose interest and perhaps even be offended to have such a book recommended!

Group reading, in which several learners read the same book, can be useful to create communication. The content of the book can be discussed and various follow-up tasks can be made for the whole group, either by the teacher or the pupils themselves. This method also gives an opportunity to differentiate the level of reading material and other tasks. However, it may be difficult to find books that 4 or 5 learners want to read at the same time. The most important principle is individual choice to ensure motivation to read.

Class reading and sharing of books is useful with books containing central themes in the national curriculum. A list of recommended titles is offered for each level, but often the teachers choose other books as well. Even teenagers like to listen to books being read aloud, and it is an excellent opportunity for learners to listen to English spoken (read) correctly. The use of literature often leads to more oral activity in the classroom, because learners have a story to tell if they have read different books. Thus it gives content to a real conversation. Books can also be used as **material or inspiration for other activities**. Typical follow-up tasks are book reports that can be published and help classmates in their choice of books. The teacher can make general questions about theme and characters as clues for text or essay

writing. Also formal language can be acquired through the use of authentic text, as readers meet grammar examples in a real context. The discovery technique is now used in most grammar books, in which learners are encouraged to recognise elements of grammar in context.

These different working methods were discussed with the teachers of the project classes during seminars throughout the school year. The role of the teacher in a book-based program is central. She has to create a good atmosphere for reading, help choose the right books and lead pre- and post-reading activities. Taking part in a group that meets regularly is thus a good opportunity to get new ideas and be inspired for further work.

The pre- and post-tests

In all the classes, the same pre-and post-tests were run in the beginning and at the end of the school year. The youngest learners were given tasks of matching pictures and words, some multiple-choice tasks and some simple sentences to match with pictures. The 11-12-year-olds were tested by using parts of a test developed by the Norwegian National Learning Centre, which focused on short text reading, comprehension questions and vocabulary understanding. For a more thorough description of the tests carried out with the 4th and 7th year pupils, see Olsen (2000 and 2001). The 9th year pupils were given a test with more text reading combined with tasks to test comprehension, vocabulary knowledge and ability to form sentences. Both project and control groups took the same tests and their scores were compared.

The youngest learners also read text aloud and these were recorded on audiotape. Analyses of these recordings, made in the beginning and end of the school year, showed that readers had improved fluency more than learners in the control groups (Olsen 2000).

Methods for analysing results

The pre- and post-tests were analysed using Microsoft Excel and its data analyses program to find average results before and after reading books. This gives us a possibility to analyse progress within the groups and to compare the different groups to each other. The number of learners taking the tests can vary and is indicated by *n* (=number) in the different tables. Also, standard deviation in the groups is calculated, an indication of the variation in level within each group. A high standard deviation in a group means that there are both very good and very poor results on the tests. T-tests were carried out to examine the statistical significance in the differences between average results of the pre-and post-tests. In some cases the difference is not large enough to be statistically significant, which can be explained by the relatively low numbers of learners.

RESULTS

In the 4th year, classes with project participants show much more progress in vocabulary knowledge and text understanding than control classes. The results from the pre- and post-tests are summed up in table 1. We can see that even though the control group started out with a higher average score, the results are clear in favour of the project classes. The table shows statistical significance between results before and after the project period for the project groups. Also, fluency tested in recordings of text reading indicated that children who have been reading books are more fluent and pronounce typical English phonemes and words more correctly. For a more thorough discussion of these findings, see Olsen (2000).

Table 1. Average score, standard deviation and statistical significance calculations for project and control groups on tests before and after test period for 4th year students school year 1999/2000.

Group	Tests	Max. score	Average score	Standard deviation	significance P<0,05
Project	Before (n=85)	24	20,5	2,9	0,0000*
	<i>After (n=86)</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>22,8</i>	<i>1,8</i>	
Control	Before (n=35)	24	21,2	2,8	0,1351
	<i>After (n=33)</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>22,0</i>	<i>3,0</i>	

*P< 0,05 indicates statistically significant difference before and after test period.

Results in the 7th year, summed up in table 2, also show that project groups have made more progress during the year than the control group. The improvement in average score is higher among learners who have read books, even though the same applied this year: The control group had a better average score in the pre-test. Also here there is a statistically significant difference between results in the pre- and post-test for the project group, whereas this is not the case for the control group. Standard deviation is smaller for the 4th year learners than for the older learners, which indicates that a large part of the group has profited from reading. The spread is greater among the 12-year-olds, although the standard deviation decreases during the year. Another reason for this large standard deviation is also of course that the group is very small. The material shows some very interesting examples of individual development for weak learners, a fact that is also commented by the teachers. Some of the boys who had shown very little interest in reading, Norwegian or English, became quite enthusiastic during the year.

Table 2. Average score, standard deviation and statistical significance calculations for project and control groups on tests before and after test period for 7th year students school year 2000/2001.

Group	Tests	Max. score	Average score	Standard deviation	Significance P<0,05
Project	Before (n=41)	24	18,0	6,2	0,0295*
	<i>After (n=39)</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>20,4</i>	<i>4,9</i>	
Control	Before (n=16)	24	18,6	6,1	0,3712
	<i>After (n=14)</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>19,3</i>	<i>5,3</i>	

*P< 0,05 indicates statistically significant difference before and after test period.

An identical table, table 3 below, has been made to sum up the results from **the final year** in the reading project. The test for this level was more difficult than for the younger learners, which can explain the significant difference between maximum score and average score. The control group was initially of the same size as the project group, but due to unforeseen circumstances one group could not take the post-test. Therefore, the results of the pre-test for these learners were taken out of the material. The results show the same tendency as for the two previous years, in that learners who have been reading books make greater progress than other learners. This is also confirmed by a statistically significant difference between pre-and

post-test results. Standard deviation has increased even more for this age group. A study of individual tests shows that some learners have reached a very high level of proficiency, whereas others do not appear to have learnt much this year. However, reading books has contributed to learning also among boys who usually would not care much about the content of the English class.

Table 3. Average score, standard deviation and statistical significance calculation for project and control groups on test before and after test period for boys and girls in the 9th year school year 2000/2001.

Group	Tests	Max. score	Average score	Standard deviation	Significance P<0,05*
Project	Before (n=60)	46	25,1	10,1	0,000
	<i>After (n=65)</i>		<i>31,8</i>	<i>10,5</i>	
Control	Before (n=45)	46	16,8	11,5	0,096
	<i>After (n=42)</i>		<i>19,9</i>	<i>10,9</i>	

* P<0,05 indicates statistically significant difference before and after test period.

Boys and girls

This reading project has not had a specific focus on gender differences, but some differences have been observed both by the teachers and myself. One example is the way in which girls and boys react differently to a new approach like this one. Many girls in the older age groups are used to doing tasks “properly” and like to feel that they are in control. When exposed to books of several hundred pages, some start out with looking up all new words and soon find out that this makes the reading experience less rewarding. They enjoy reading more when they learn to guess meaning from context, and are generally keen readers. Boys, on the other hand, can more often dismiss a book as boring because there are too many difficult words.

Do boys and girls have a different degree of progress as a result of reading books? A survey done in the same region among second year pupils to examine reading ability in Norwegian shows clear differences between boys and girls. Here boys score generally lower on all types of tests (Johansen and Abelsen 2000). The present material does not show such great differences, but we can see the same tendency. Boys tend to score a little lower than girls, but they also seem to profit from reading books. This is clear in tables 4, 5 and 6 below, where we can see that boys in years 4 and 9 have made more progress than the girls. Perhaps interesting books can motivate boys who easily get bored and lose interest, especially among teenagers. Using books as learning material gives an ideal opportunity to differentiate in level of difficulty and allow learners to choose books containing themes they are interested in.

Table 4. Average score for project and control groups on test before and after test period for boys and girls in the 4th year school year 1999/2000.

Group	Tests	Max. score	Average boys	Average girls	Significance P<0,05*
Project**	Before (n=45)	24	19,6 (n=20)	20,2 (n=25)	0,3048
	<i>After (n=45)</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>22,4 (n=21)</i>	<i>22,4 (n=24)</i>	<i>0,4922</i>
Control	Before (n=35)	24	21,4 (n=17)	21,0 (n=18)	0,3570
	<i>After (n=33)</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>22,1 (n=14)</i>	<i>21,9 (n=19)</i>	<i>0,1626</i>

* P<0.05 indicates statistically significant difference between boys and girls

** Two classes have been taken out because parts of the test set were anonymised on the first test and because the classes were uneven gender wise.

Table 5. Average score for project and control groups on test before and after test period for boys and girls in the 7th year school year 2000/2001.

Group	Tests	Max. score	Average boys	Average girls	Significance P<0,05*
Project	Before (n=41)	24	17,7 (n=24)	18,5 (n=17)	0,3048
	<i>After (n=39)</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>19,7 (n=23)</i>	<i>21,6 (n=16)</i>	<i>0,1189</i>
Control	Before (n=16)	24	17,1 (n=7)	19,7 (n=9)	0,2241
	<i>After (n=14)</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>16,8 (n=6)</i>	<i>21,6 (n=8)</i>	<i>0,0771</i>

* P<0.05 indicates statistically significant difference between boys and girls

Table 6. Average score for project and control groups on test before and after test period for boys and girls in the 9th year school year 2000/2001.

Group	Tests	Max. score	Average boys	Average girls	Significance P<0,05*
Project	Before (n=60)	46	23,3 (n=29)	26,6 (n=31)	0,105
	<i>After (n=65)</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>32,6 (n=32)</i>	<i>31,2 (n=33)</i>	<i>0,295</i>
Control	Before (n=45)	46	13,8 (n=28)	21,6 (n=17)	0,013
	<i>After (n=42)</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>16,2 (n=24)</i>	<i>24,8 (n=18)</i>	<i>0,004</i>

* P<0,05 indicates statistically significant difference between boy and girls.

The tables above show that learners appear to score better on vocabulary and comprehension tests after having read quite a lot of books in English during a school year. However, the most important result of extensive reading is that learners enjoy reading and show this in class and at home. The teachers report of enthusiasm when new books were brought into the classroom, which is not a normal reaction to receiving other new learning material. This positive attitude and the pleasure experienced through reading leads to increased motivation and language development. The display of books also created interest outside the class, and there were reports of pupils from other classes who wanted to know why they were not given books to read at school!

The teachers also describe their pupils as more confident to speak English in class. There is more oral activity among the book readers. This can be communication about the reading material or in other situations. In year 9 oral examinations were carried out with the books as core material, which gave real content to the test.

The project was evaluated by parents and pupils for the two lower age groups. This evaluation was in general very positive, and some parents strongly believed that their child had improved his or her knowledge of English during the year. A teacher comment repeated a few times was that it is more fun to be a teacher, and that “using this approach has made me a better teacher”. One explanation for this point of view can be that the use of authentic books written for children and especially teenagers add content and contemporary language to the classroom that the teacher not always finds so easy to do using ordinary learning material.

The control groups have had an ordinary approach in the project period, but an examination of this has not been made and only the teachers in the project classes have been involved in seminars on the use of books. There is a possibility that results can have been affected by the special situation, for example that “our” teachers have been more motivated and motivating in general from taking part in the project. This is difficult to measure and take into account. However, in both groups there are teachers with varying levels of qualifications as teachers of English, and the schools themselves picked out the teachers for the project.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this reading project was to find out whether extensive reading of English books would increase children’s learning of English as a foreign language. Also, it was important to find an approach in working with English in school that creates motivation after the initial curious phase. During the three years the project has been carried out, about 185 learners have been exposed to interesting books in inviting displays where possible. A comparison of test results shows that reading has led to increased learning, and reports from the classrooms indicate clearly that learners are more motivated for English if they can meet the language in a literary context they enjoy. The limited amount of text in ordinary textbooks does not give enough practice to develop vocabulary, but when learners get used to reading longer texts, they start using a technique of guessing meaning from context. This is a recognised way of increasing language knowledge (Nation 1990).

The use of books has varied in the different age groups, from more joint reading with the youngest learners to more individual reading among the oldest learners. However, the stories in the books have been used for a range of activities aimed at developing language proficiency. The role of the teacher here is that of a facilitator and role model, and this is a very important role. This is acknowledged in a number of classroom research reports and summed up quite pointedly in this quotation:

“what teachers know and can do is one of the most important influences on what students learn” (*Darling-Hammond, 1998:6, quoted in Hellekjær, 2001*)

Research has shown that in many English classrooms, there is a limited part of the communication that goes on in the target language (Olsen 1998b). Even teacher trainees who have studied English for one year are not proficient enough to use the language confidently in class (Hellekjær 2001). Both for teachers and learners it is a good help to have extensive input, here in the form of good books, but it is the task of the teacher to give an opportunity

for extensive output also by creating space for communication. In the project groups there has been more oral activity than earlier, even the most silent ones have had to talk about their books and take part in other activities.

We have seen that there is a traditional difference between boys and girls, in that girls score generally higher on tests. They are also reported to be the most eager readers who choose the most advanced books. However, many of the boys have developed a great interest in books containing topics they do not usually meet in school material. Finding motivating material and activities for boys who easily get bored is a great challenge for teachers, and good books can offer just that. It would be very interesting to investigate further into gender differences and language learning, for example by looking at possible differences in vocabulary types in their written and oral English.

The number of learners taking part in this reading project is not large, therefore the results can only give an idea of how successful reading has been in terms of increasing motivation and learning effect. However, we see the same tendencies as shown in large national schemes, such as the Hong Kong Extensive Reading Scheme in English. After a successful pilot project the government decided to provide books for all children at certain levels in school. However, it proved difficult to continue the reading scheme in many of the schools mostly because the teachers were not trained in using this approach, and focus easily changes towards textbook-based teaching in a culture that does not include reading for pleasure (Wendy Arnold, private communication). In Norway we have a tradition of story telling and reading for our children that can be built on when using books in the classroom, but there is no time to lose now that other media seem to be taking over for reading books in our society. The approach of using literature in the English classroom should be central in the education of teachers to make the students better qualified English teachers.

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Appendix

Some favourite titles among the youngest learners, aged 9 and 10:

Ahlberg, J. and A.:	Burglar Bill Starting School Cops and Robbers
Ahlberg, A. & Amstutz.	Dinosaur Dreams The Black Cat The Ghost Train Bumps in the Night
Carle, E.:	The Very Hungry Caterpillar
Cole, B.:	The Trouble with Dad, Uncle, Grandpa (the whole series) The Bad Good Manners Book Princess Smartypants Winni Alfours
Dodd, L.	Hairy Maclary (the whole series)
Langley, J.:	Little Red Riding Hood The Three Bears and Goldilocks The Three Billy Goats Gruff
Lear, E.:	The Owl and the Pussycat
Mahy, M.	The Horrendous Hullabaloo The Man Whose Mother was a Pirate
Moore, I.:	Six Dinner Sid
Paul, K. and Thomas, V.:	Winnie in Winter Winnie the Witch
Rosen, M. & Oxbury, H.:	We're Going on a Bear Hunt
Ryan, M.:	The Littlest Dragon
Scieszka, J.:	The Frog Prince Continued
Dr. Seuss:	The Cat in the Hat Green Eggs and Ham

The following list includes some of the favourite authors and titles in stage two of the project with learners aged 12 and 13:

Allan Ahlberg:	The Happy Families series It was a Dark and Stormy Night
R. Childs:	The Football Series
R. Dahl:	Fantastic Mr. Fox The Enormous Crocodile
G. Deals:	The Sleepover Club series
M. Foreman:	Dinosaurs and all that Rubbish
P. Hutchins:	Don't Forget the Bacon
J. Nimmo:	The Box Boys and the Dog in the Mist

J. Page:	I Will, Well Nell
J. Wilson:	Dognapped
	The Mum-Minder
	Double Act
	The Lottie Project
	The Bed and Breakfast Star

The older teenagers at 14-15 read a great variety of books, ranging from simple illustrated books written for their age group or younger to more difficult books, as this list of example titles shows. Some of the classics are abridged versions.

A. Ahlberg:	The Happy Families series
J. Austen:	Emma
	Sense and Sensibility
M. Cabot:	The Princess Diaries
R. Dahl:	The Witches
	The BFG
C. Dickens:	Hard Times
	Oliver Twist
A. Fine:	Charm School
Maurier:	The Birds
T. Pratchett:	Amazing Maurice
J.R.R. Tolkien:	The Lord of the Rings
M. Twain:	The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
J.R. Rawlins:	The Harry Potter series
W. Shakespeare:	Romeo and Juliet
J. Swift:	Gulliver's Travels
J. Wilson:	How to Survive a Summer Camp
Several Authors:	The Sweet Valley University series