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A socio-affective approach to improving students' reading comprehension abilities

by

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Table of contents

LIST OF TABLES VIII

LIST OF FIGURES IX

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS XI

ABSTRACT XII

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 1

1.1 Introduction 1

1.2 Academic reading 2

1.3 Possible causes of inadequate academic reading abilities of university students 4
1.3.1 Causes related to the social and cultural environment of the learners 5
1.3.2 Causes related to primary and secondary education in South Africa 7
1.3.3 Demands and constraints of the tertiary education sector 9

1.4 Evidence of poor reading ability 10

1.5 Responses to the problem of students' inadequate academic reading abilities 11
1.5.1 Intervention programmes 11
1.5.2 Limitations of previous and current reading intervention programmes 12

1.6 Desiderata for holistic interventions 13

1.7 Gaps in existing research 15

1.8 Methodology 15
1.8.1 Research questions 15
1.8.2 Aims of the present study 16
1.8.3 Hypotheses 16
1.8.4 Research design and procedure 17
1.8.4.1 Research design 17
1.8.4.2 Research procedure 17
1.8.4.2.1 Phase 1: Pre-intervention phase of research (questions 1 & 2) 18
1.8.4.2.2 Phase 2: Designing and administering the intervention (question 3) 18
1.8.4.2.3 Phase 3: Pre- and post-intervention and cross-intervention analyses (question 4) 18
1.8.4.2.4 Phase 4: Evaluation and integration of anlyses 19

1.9 Conclusion 19

1.10 Structure of the thesis 19

CHAPTER 2: THEORIES OF READING AND READING COMPREHENSION ABILITY 21

2.1 Introduction 21

2.2 Importance of academic reading 21

2.3 Reading theories 22
2.3.1 Cognitive views of reading 22
2.3.1.1Bottom-up approaches 22
2.3.1.2 Top-down approach 25
2.3.1.3 Interactive approach 27
2.3.1.4 Comprehensive interactive view of reading 30
2.3.2 Social view of reading 35
2.3.3 Affective/ response theories 39
2.3.4 Current directions in reading development 40
2.3.4.1 Metacognition 41
2.3.4.2 New Literacy Studies 42

2.4 Social and psychological theories that relate to learning 48

2.5 A synopsis and justification for social and affective issues inreading development 52

2.6..Conclusion 54

CHAPTER 3: SOCIO-AFFECTIVE FACTORS IN READING AND THE ENGAGEMENT MODEL 56

3.1 Introduction 56

3.2 Socio-affective factors 56
3.2.1 Motivation 59
3.3.2 Self-efficacy 62
3.3.3 Interest 63
3.3.4 Attitude 64
3.3.5 Social and cultural factors 68
3.3.5.1 Home environment 68
3.3.5.2 School environment 69
3.3.5.3 Cultural influence 70
3.3.6 Engaged reading 71
3.3.7 A synopsis 72

3.4 Engagement framework for reading instruction 73
3.4.1. Self-determination Theory 73
3.4.2 Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) framework 77
3.4.2.1..Learning and knowledge goals 78
3.4.2.2..Real-world interactions 79
3.4.2.3 Autonomy support 79
3.4.2.4 Interesting texts 80
3.4.2.5 Strategy Instruction (competence support) 80
3.4.2.6 Collaboration (relatedness support) 80
3.4.2.7 Rewards and Praise 81
3.4.2.8 Teacher involvement 81
3.4.2.9 Evaluation 82

3.4.3 Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) Engagement Model 82
3.4.4 The adapted model 85
3.4.4.1 Students' needs 86
3.4.4.2 Institutional demands and constraints 87
3.4.4.3 L2 reading and learning issues 90
3.4.4.3.1 The second language 91
3.4.4.3.2 The L2 learner/reader 92
3.4.4.3.3 The L2 learning environment 93
3.4.4.3.4 The socio-cultural context 94
3.4.4.4 L2 motivational issues 95
3.4.4.4.1 Creating basic motivational conditions 97
3.4.4.4.2 Generating initial motivation 97
3.4.4.4.3 Maintaining and protecting motivation 98
3.4.4.4.4 Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation 100

3.5 Adapted framework for academic reading development **101**

3.6 Conclusion **103**

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY **105**

4.1 Introduction **105**

4.2 Research design **105**

4.3 Participants **106**
4.3.1 Phase 1(2009 Exploratory survey) 107
4.3.2 Phase 3 (2010 quasi-experimental study) 107

4.4 Measurement tools **109**
4.4.1 Phase 1 (2009 exploratory study on students' needs) 109
4.4.1.1Reading experience 109
4.4.1.2 Reading in the social environment/social literacy 110
4.4.1.3 Interest in reading 110
4.5.1.4 Attitudes towards reading 110
4.4.1.5 Self-efficacy 110
4.4.1.6 Intrinsic motivation 111
4.4.1.7 Extrinsic motivation 111
4.4.1.8 Reading strategies 111
4.4.1.9 Reading habits 112
4.4.2 Phase 3 (2010 quasi-experimental study) 112

4.5 Data collection **113**
4.5.1 Phase 1 (2009 exploratory study on students' needs) 113
4.5.2 Phase 3 (2010 quasi-experimental quantitative and qualitative studies) 113

4.6 Data analysis **114**
4.6.1 Quantitative data (Phase 1) 114
4.6.2 Quantitative data (quasi-experimental study) 115
4.6.3 Qualitative data 115

4.8 Research outline **117**
4.8.1 Phase 1: pre-intervention phase of research (research questions 1 and 2) 118
4.8.2 Phase 2: Designing and administering the intervention (Research question 3) 118
4.8.3 Phase 3: Cross intervention analyses (Research question 4) 118
4.8.4 Phase 4: Evaluation and integration of analyses 119

4.9 Ethical considerations **120**

4.10 Conclusion **120**

CHAPTER 5: EXPLORATION OF STUDENTS' SOCIO-AFFECTIVE PROFILE **122**

5.1 Introduction **122**

5.2 The exploratory survey: Phase 1 **122**

5.3 Methodology **123**
5.3.1 Participants 123
5.3.2 Procedure 124
5.3.3 Measurement tool/instrument (questionnaire) 125
5.3.3.1 Reading experience 125
5.3.3.2 Reading in the social environment/social literacy 125
5.3.3.3 Interest in reading 125
5.3.3.4 Attitudes towards reading 125
5.3.3.5 Self-efficacy 126
5.3.3.6 Intrinsic motivation 126
5.3.3.7 Extrinsic motivation 126
5.3.3.8 Reading strategies 126
5.3.3.9 Reading habits 126

5.4 Results **126**
5.4.1 Descriptive statistics 127
5.4.2 Inferential statistics 131
5.4.2.1 Reading experience 132
5.4.2.2 Social literacy/social reading environment 134
5.4.2.3 Perceptions of reading capabilities (self-efficacy) 135
5.4.2.4 Interest in reading 137
5.4.2.5 Attitude towards reading 139
5.4.2.6 Intrinsic motivation 140
5.4.2.7 Extrinsic motivation 142
5.4.2.8 Strategy use 142
5.4.2.9 Reading habits 143
5.4.3 Summary statistics for gender and faculty 144
5.4.3.1 Gender 145
5.4.3.2 Faculty 146
5.4.4 Summary of the results 149
5.4.5 Strongest predictors of reading ability 151

5.5 Discussion **152**

5.6 Implications of survey results for intervention instruction **156**

5.7 Conclusion **157**

CHAPTER 6: READING INTERVENTION PROGRAMME **159**

6.1 Introduction **159**

6.2 Intervention: enrichment and tasks **159**
6.2.2 Section 2: Reading strategies 162

6.2.3 Section 3: Academic vocabulary 166
6.2.4 Section 4: Critical reading 167
6.2.4.1. Inferencing 168
6.2.4.2 Writer's stance 169
6.2.4.3 Evaluating arguments 170
6.2.5 Extensive reading 170

6.3 Synopsis **172**

6.4 Conclusion **175**

CHAPTER 7: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PRE- AND POST-INTERVENTION QUESTIONNAIRES **176**

7.1 Introduction **176**

7.2 Methodology **176**
7.2.1 Participants 176
7.2.2 Procedure 177
7.2.3 Instrument 178

7.3 Results of the quasi-experiment **180**
7.3.1 Presentation and analysis of pre-questionnaires 181
7.3.2 Presentation and analysis of post-intervention data 182
7.3.2.1 Descriptive statistics: Presentation of pre- and post-intervention results 183
7.3.2.2 Inferential statistics: Paired t-test and independent t-test Analysis of differences between control and intervention classes 184
7.3.2.2.1 Paired t-test 184
7.3.2.2.2 Independent t-test 185
7.3.3 Differential performance (effect sizes) 189

7.4 Discussion **191**

7.5 Conclusion **194**

CHAPTER 8: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE STUDENT INTERVIEWS **196**

8.2 Methodology **197**
8.2.1 Respondents 197
8.2.2 Instrument 198
8.2.3 Procedure 201

8.3 Presentation and analysis of data **202**
8.3.1 Learning and knowledge goals 203
8.3.2 Relevant texts 204
8.3.3 Competence support: strategy instruction 205
8.3.4 Teacher support 208
8.3.5 Autonomy support 210
8.3.6 Collaboration 211
8.3.7 Rewards and praise 214
8.3.8 Learning environment 216
8.3.9 Extensive reading 218
8.3.10 General comments 221

8.4 Discussion **223**

8.5 Conclusion 225

CHAPTER 9: INTEGRATING THE QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESULTS 227

9.1. Introduction 227

9.2 Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings 227
9.2.1 Learning and knowledge goals 228
9.2.2 Relevant and interesting texts 229
9.2.3 Teacher support 230
9.2.4 Competence support (strategy instruction) 232
9.2.5 Collaboration 234
9.2.6 Rewards and praise 235
9.2.7 Autonomy 236
9.2.8 Learning environment 236
9.2.9 Extensive reading 237

9.3 Summary 239

9.4 Conclusion 241

CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION 242

10.1 Introduction 242

10.2 Research problem, theoretical and conceptual framework 244

10.3 Summary of results 245

10.4 Limitations and further research 247

10.5 Significance of study 249

10.6 Recommendations 250
10.6.1 Classroom level 250
10.6.2 Institutional level 254

10.7 Conclusion 255

REFERENCES 257

APPENDICES: ON CD

List of tables

1.1	Categorisation of students' performance in the TALL for 2010 and 2011	10
2.1	Reading processes that are activated when we read (Grabe & Stoller 2002:18)	30
5.1	Distribution of literacy groups	128
5.2	Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for literacy groups in relation to socio-affective variables	128
5.3	Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for language groups in relation to socio-affective factors/variables	130
5.4	Scheffe groupings and mean scores for literacy levels in relation to reading experience	132
5.5	Scheffe grouping and mean scores for first/home language in relation to reading experience	133
5.6	Scheffe grouping and mean scores for literacy levels in relation to self-efficacy	136
5.7	Scheffe grouping and mean scores for literacy groups and interest	137
5.8	Scheffe grouping and mean scores for literacy codes on intrinsic motivation	140
5.9	Scheffe grouping and mean scores for first language on intrinsic motivation	141
5.10	Scheffe groupings and mean scores for first language on extrinsic motivation	142
5.11	Scheffe groupings and mean scores in strategy use for first language groups	143
5.12	Means and significant values for gender and socio-affective variables	145
5.13	Scheffe grouping and mean scores for faculty in relation to students' use of reading strategies	148
5.14	Summary of significant results of ANOVA: main effects and interactions	148
5.15	Cumulative Logit analysis results of predictor variables	152
6.1	Six steps to motivational strategy instruction (main idea comprehension)	163
6.2	Example of inventory used for evaluating strategies	165
6.3	Template for extensive reading	171
7.1	Distribution of questionnaires used for the study according to students class and group	177
7.2	Levene's test for homogeneity for intervention and control classes in High/At Risk and Low/No Risk groups	181
7.3	Pre-and post-intervention means for High/At Risk and Low/No Risk group	183
7.4	Results of paired t-test for control and intervention classes in High/At Ri and Low/No Risk groups	185
7.5	Improvement scores for control and intervention classes in terms of values and means	186
7.6	Table showing p-values for improvement differences between control and intervention classes in *At Risk* and *Low Risk* groups	188

7.7	Results of paired t-test with effect sizes for control and intervention classes in the High/At Risk and Low/No Risk groups	189
7.8	Results of independent t-test (improvement scores) with effect sizes	190
8.1	Number of students interviewed per performance in pre- and post-tests	198
8.2	Teaching techniques showing areas of focus for interviews	198
8.3	Pertinent issues raised under general comments and percentage of students	222

List of figures

2.1	Three levels of ESLR (August 2006)	44
2.2	Social cognitive theory: B represents behaviour, E represents the external environment, and P represents personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events	50
3.1	Relationship between motivation, engagement and achievement	72
3.2	A model showing the influence of social and cultural factors on affective factors or levels in reading ability	73
3.3	Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) Engagement model for reading development	83
3.4	Framework for developing academic reading ability of L2 tertiary students	102
4.1	Schematic representation of the integration of quantitative and qualitative analyses	119
4.2	Alignment of research questions, data source, analyses and chapters in thesis	121
5.1	Interaction between faculty and home/first language with regard to students' reading experience	134
5.2	Interaction between literacy levels and students' home/first language in relation to their self-efficacy	137
5.3	Interaction between students' faculty and their home language in relation to their interest in reading	138
5.4	Interaction between students' faculty and home language in relation to their attitudes towards reading	140
5.5	Interaction between literacy levels and home language in relation to their reading habits	144
5.6	Interaction between faculty and students' first language with regard to their social literacy/reading environment	146
5.7	Interaction between students' faculty and gender with regard to their social reading backgrounds	147
7.1	Chart showing improvement scores for intervention and control classes in the *At Risk* group	187
7.2	Improvement scores for the intervention and control classes of the *Low Risk* group	188
8.1	Percentage of students in relation to the issues they raised under general comments	222
8.2	Cyclical and reciprocal processes resulting from a socio-affective teaching approach	225
9.1	Chart showing mean figures for motivational levels of *At Risk* students	231
9.2	Chart showing mean figures for motivational levels of *Low Risk* students	231
9.3	Chart showing mean figures for attitudinal levels for *At Risk* students	232
9.4	Chart showing mean figures for attitudinal levels for *Low Risk* students	232
10.1	Summary of the research strategy to address the aims of the study	243

Appendices (on CD)

1	Ethical clearance letter	1
2A	Informed consent by students (questionnaires phase 1)	2
2B	Informed consent by students (questionnaires, participation, interviews)	4
3A	Questionnaire: Exploratory survey (phase 1)	7
3B	Questionnaire: Quasi-experimental survey (phase 3)	12
4A	Intervention programme (Low/No Risk group)	16
4B	Intervention programme (High/At Risk group)	18
5	Gerry's vocabulary exercises (Sample)	20
6	Brief summary of interview responses	21
7A	Detailed summary of interview responses (Low/No Risk group)	26
7B	Detailed summary of interview responses (High/At Risk group)	41

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Abstract

The low literacy levels of the majority of first-year students at tertiary institutions in South Africa have been a major cause of concern. Various attempts have been made to assist students to develop their academic literacy levels – especially academic reading. However, most of these attempts are solely cognitive-oriented, even though there has been increasing acknowledgement of the relationship between socio-affective factors and students' academic reading abilities. The purpose of this research was to explore a socio-affective approach to improving the reading abilities of first-year students at the University of Pretoria (UP). The following questions guided the research:

(1) Is there a significant relationship between socio-affective factors and students' academic reading abilities?
(2) Which socio-affective factors best predict tertiary students' academic reading abilities?
(3) How can knowledge of socio-affective factors be used to design a more effective reading intervention?
(4) How effective is a reading intervention programme that incorporates socio-affective factors?

A mixed methods design was used for the study which was conducted in four phases. The first phase consisted of an exploratory study in the form of a questionnaire survey that elicited information on first-year UP students' reading background, socio-affective reading levels and the use of reading strategies in relation to their reading proficiency levels, as determined by the Test for Academic Literacy Levels (TALL). ANOVA tests were used for the analysis of TALL results while a Cumulative Logit (regression) analysis was conducted to determine the socio-affective factors that best predict these students' reading ability. ANOVA tests showed a robust relationship between students' social and affective reading background on one hand, and their reading proficiency levels on the other. The regression analysis showed that self-efficacy was the best predictor of students' reading ability, followed by intrinsic motivation.

Based on the empirical results, and an adapted model of Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), an intervention programme that served as enrichment to the existing Academic Reading module, and aimed at improving the reading abilities of students by focussing on socio-affective issues in particular, was designed (as phase 2) and implemented (as phase 3) of

the study. Two control groups and two intervention groups of *At Risk* and *Low Risk* students were used for the study. Questionnaires on affective reading levels and strategy use were administered before and after the intervention.

In phase four, quantitative analysis using t-tests (independent and paired t-tests) with effect sizes were performed on the pre- and post-intervention questionnaire responses. Results showed significant improvements in affective levels for reading in the intervention groups compared to the control groups. In addition, qualitative data were collected via interviews on the socio-affective teaching techniques used for the intervention, and analysed qualitatively using content analysis. The results of the qualitative study were used to support the quantitative findings in terms of the measure in which the teaching approach contributed to the improvement in students' socio-affective levels in reading, which according to research, correlates with students' reading ability. Based on the findings, recommendations are made at the classroom and institutional levels. The significance of the study in terms of enriching theory and designing innovative support to improve students' reading ability serve as a conclusion to the thesis.

Keywords: Socio-affective factors, reading comprehension ability, academic reading, reading literacy, engagement, motivation, attitude, interest, self-efficacy, strategy use, engaged reading, L2 reading, tertiary level.