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

by

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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.