

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

And I Ordered the Jinn, “Make My Students Read more!”

Amita Sanghvi

Sultan Qaboos University

As a teacher of English, who is herself an avid reader, one of the great agendas I carried in my heart and to my classroom was how to get my students to read more. ‘More’ was always too less for me as a voracious reader, so I was never satisfied that my students were only reading a single story book for an entire semester apart from the prescribed academic reading.

I felt that reading one book outside the classroom was too less, I wanted my students to be greedy for reading more- I wanted them to enjoy and ask for more and more books to read and complain that they were given too less to read- just as my little greedy pup always feels one piece of meat is far too less for the whole day, and gulps it down in no time, and then looks up with that expression- ‘What, are you going to keep me starving? Do give me more!’

So basically I wanted hungry students, starving to read more, with absolutely no issues of low motivation.

This was not just my die-hard wish that I had set out to the universe, most of us teachers at the Language Center wanted this one miracle. So, we, the faculty at the Sultan Qaboos University where I am so proud to say I belong, came up with some *real* solution for developing *real* Extensive Reading habits: we started using the Mreader.org (<https://mreader.org/index.php>)

The National university of Oman, Sultan Qaboos University, has had an English Language Centre since 25 years. In 2016, the Language Centre has become bigger and changed to Centre

of Preparatory Studies (CPS) where a full-fledged Foundation Programme is offered at the Pre-University level, teaching English, Math and IT courses.

Right from Level One, the English Language courses use Mreader.org for ensuring Extensive reading outside the classroom in order to engage students in enhancing their English Vocabulary and Reading skills outside the classroom. Mreader.org is an online resource of Quizzes on hundreds of storybooks/ readers in English in multiple levels. Students are asked to read storybooks of their level, and then they attempt quizzes. Students get marks for having successfully completed quizzes and reading the assigned number of words. Students are able to read at their current level without a dictionary. Students can read any book at their current level (L) plus two levels above. For example, FPEL0340 students start at MReader level 1, and they can also read levels 2 and 3. See boxes on the right of student screen (L, L+1, L+2). However, if a student wants to move up or down a level, you can manually change his current level. Teachers enroll students, and orient them to the state of the art Self Access Centre at the University where they pick up readers according to their course levels. Students then attempt quizzes online in their own time or in designated classes in fully equipped language labs booked for quiz days by the lecturers. Normally, promotion to the next reading level happens automatically, after the student has read 6 books at their current level. As each year passes by, using Mreader.org has been a roaring success facilitating Extensive Reading outside the classroom; it has been a compelling and an interesting platform for students that is backed by the lure of getting 'marks' that add to their grades directly.

Our students now have a range of words to read per level of their 14-week Foundation English course- lowest starting from 10,000 minimum and as they move on to the next higher level of their English course, they have to read up to 50,000 words in total over 14 weeks.

We mark them on how many quizzes they pass on the story books they have read; they cannot read the same title again; no two students can read the same title; a student cannot take more than one quiz attempt per book. We sizzle this up with competitions to encourage them to read more. Here is a competition announcement made by the MReader co-ordinator Tim Hendrix, at CPS:

We are going to run the MReader competition again this semester, with results sent to students every two to three weeks. The top male and top female reader from each course will receive a certificate and a prize. I'm also expanding the competition to include a certificate of recognition for all of the students who read double the required word count for their courses. I am hoping to host a public ceremony for the top achievers in MReader at the end of this semester. The results have been truly mind-boggling as students are reading in the area of 50,000 words at the lowest level to almost 500,000 words at the highest level.

In my class, I open the Mreader.org's teacher account I hold as an SQU faculty, and I show the students the collective class report where they can see who is leading in the number of words they have read. This is like a red flag in front of a raging bull- the students so love to compete with the other gender that they go well beyond 50,000 words by half time in the semester; they also make requests that I up their level on Mreader so that they can borrow higher level books from the library that are longer texts; they take quizzes over weekends, and that makes me so much happier.

The Mreader.org has truly been the most innovative tool that has been very logically and thoroughly applied at the Center of Preparatory Studies of SQU. Over the years, all the creases have been ironed out, the students have fallen into the habit of picking up stories that are categorized under themes, thanks to the University Self-Learning Centre promoting Learner

Autonomy, students read from several different subject areas and themes including Sports, Animal world, Adventures, People and Cultures, Sci-fi, Romance, History etc., to name a few.

What makes this even more fruitful is I tie it up with another Study Skills compulsory requirement of Foundation Program- the Portfolio. All students need to actively and autonomously learn the five different Language skills outside the Classroom-Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking and Vocabulary. For Vocabulary skills, they submit a vocabulary log weekly, for 14 weeks. For their weekly Vocabulary Log, they have to enter an n number of words according to their level. For example, for the initial Levels 1 and 2 students enter and learn 10 words a week (minimum) and so on and so forth- higher level students do 20 a week; and they get marked for this aspect of their Self-study Portfolio. I encourage them to use the storybooks they read as a source of new words they come across. I further bring in technology by getting them to download dictionary.com on their phones to look up new words and make a note of them in the Logs.

So, as the 14 weeks go by, they produce a repertoire of words as many as 150+ at the lowest level of the Foundation Program, and 300+ in higher levels, for which again they are randomly quizzed and marked during Portfolio interviews.

Using technology outside the classroom, but supplementing it with a full-fledged well-stocked Library and a huge reading room that has also become a hotspot for students to learn outside the classroom in in pairs, groups or individually, I find that we have made the world of vocabulary learning and extensive reading dynamic indeed for our freshmen entering their Pre University English courses. Adding spice to it are competitions of Star readers, 'best book'

recommendations, and competitions within my class for the students who read *more* and say, give me *more*!

I always say them in the end, words are like green bills, the more you have the richer you are, so how much cash you carry is similar to how many words you carry in a Language- and this wonderful site Mreader.org is the ultimate tool to enhance extensive reading. I tell them that being in SQU is always exciting, as we go for the best resources and I am a happier teacher as I have followed my heart and birthed a generation of voracious readers in my classroom, semester after semester thanks to online resources in English Education, the Jinn of our future generation, which will provide them *more* at the click of a button!