THEORETICAL ASPECTS AND APPLICATIONS OF SUSTAINED SILENT READING IN THE ESP CLASS

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Abstract: In the digital era where tertiary students are one click away from any piece of information, can reading still be a pleasure rather than a burden? This study aims to look at students' critical thinking during and after a sustained silent reading activity (SSR) meant to improve vocabulary, spelling and writing skills, and to analyse students' attitudes and motivation. We embarked on a pilot study conducted for one month during which students were involved in a SSR activity for 10-15 minutes at the beginning of each ESP class based on the course topics.

Keywords: sustained silent reading, ESP, attitude, motivation

Introductory Remarks

English for Specific Purposes course is part of students' curriculum in their first year of study at university, involving millennial students who come from different backgrounds. Students are new to the university environment and requirements and they represent the digital generation which needs special attention, and which enjoys interactive and dynamic activities as they lose patience and interest quite fast. Therefore, besides the mandatory topics to be studied in class, language instructors should create engaging activities that attract students' in learning new vocabulary, improving the skills that they need in order to use ESP efficiently. Instructors should also design activities which are focused on the students' needs, wants and interests.

In this context, we engaged students in a scaffolded discovery meant to bring autonomy and creativity, but also to encourage students to read more and be able to focus on a task individually and silently. As such, at the beginning of each course, all the students had to bring in class a text of their choice or one sent by the teacher prior to the English class, but which had to be connected to the unit discussed a week before in class and to spend the first ten minutes silently reading the text.

1. Project Motivation and Hypotheses

We started from the assumption that our students need to be engaged in various interesting activities in order to help them improve their vocabulary and reading skills, while at the same time letting them use their mobile devices and the Internet (if they wanted) and, in this way, "promoting learning" (see Belchamber, 2007). Our project initially started from the following three research hypotheses:

- research hypothesis 1 (RH 1): students improve their reading skills if they read more in English;
- research hypothesis 2 (RH 2): the results of SSR are better if students are allowed to choose their own texts to read;

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- research hypothesis 3 (RH 3): students' attitudes to reading in English and their motivation to carry out this type of activity increase if they are stimulated to read.

From our teaching experience, it seemed that students are much more involved in the English class activities if given the freedom to use their mobile devices and the Internet, to choose some of the tasks to be carried out in class, while also learning new vocabulary and new ideas, even though the content itself is not always easy to grasp.

2. Theoretical Considerations and Description of the Project

a. Theoretical Considerations

As reading constitutes one of the skills that is tested at the Test of Linguistic Competence but also an activity which enriches students specialized knowledge and vocabulary in the field and critical thinking, we decided to focus and improve this receptive skill for the students in our ESP course by the technique of *uninterruptedsustained silent reading* - USSR (see Meyers, 1998) as we consider that the transferable skills developed by this kind of reading are extremely useful for ESP students and can also prepare them for the language exam as literature in the field has proved (see Ali, 2012; Rosseau, 2012). Hence, sustained silent reading (SSR) "is not only intuitively appealing but also is supported by research" (see Garan, 2008) and it offers a new direction for teachers and researchers (see Hiebert and Reutzel, 2014).

The specialized literature on the subject of reading usually starts from and focuses on two opposing categories: *reading aloud* versus *silent reading*. Our aim was to engage students in an autonomous and authentic activity and that is why we selected the silent reading over loud reading for our project. Thus, we identify several arguments in favour of using silent reading in an ESP class: silent reading is performed in authentic contexts on a daily basis (reading the news online, books, leaflets, labels etc.) and in this way the ESP class imitates daily routines and students can actually enjoy a text individually. SSR activates the cognitive processing of textual information (see Mureșan and Cotoc, 2016: 84), it provides a relaxing atmosphere which fosters learning, offering students the possibility to focus on their topics of interest, to be attentive on the texts, mentally visualising the topic under focus, developing efficient reading strategies which allow for a better understanding. Students can take in ideas without being aware and then use them both in their personal life and in the academic/professional world.

Taking the idea of silent reading a step forward, we saw the need of doing this activity in a **sustained** way and we involved students in this activity at the beginning of each ESP class. Because this activity became part of the English course and it was scheduled at the beginning it became a reinforcement activity for the entire semester, offering the students the possibility to deepen their knowledge of the topics discussed in the ESP course, but at the same time offering them the freedom to reinforce the aspects that they were interested in and to form "a community of readers" (see Chow and Chou, 2000).

Our SSR project was meant to be an "individualised" (Kok, 2009: 94) and pseudo *extensive reading* performance aiming at triggering reading for pleasure and/or "reading in which learners read resources which are written within their linguistic competence" (McLeand and Rouault 2017: 3) or empowering students to adapt the texts to their linguistic competence and encouraging learning useful and appealing information. SSR also aims at an independent reading practice (see Sanden, 2014) and implies the process of familiarising learners with second language reading in which the gist of the text is more important that actually being able to understand every word in the text and developing the sense of awareness and desire for vocabulary improvement without engrossing in stressful and time-consuming dictionary searches

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due to unknown words. SSR encourages the view that unknown words are not supposed to be a stumble upon reading in a second language, but rather a contextual discovery of lexical items as "language acquisition comes from input, not output; from comprehension, not production" (Krashen, 2004: 136).

b. Description of the project

In implementing our project, we gave students approximately 10 at the beginning of each English class for the (uninterrupted) Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) activity when they were supposed to read a text based on the course units, with the purpose of improving their comprehension, vocabulary, and reading skills (research hypotheses 1 and 2). The project was carried out as an experiment which lasted for one month and we called it "SSR for a Month". At the end of the project, students were asked to fill in a questionnaire related to our activity in order to assess their perception of, attitudes to, motivation and involvement in the project. They were also rewarded with 0.5 points to be added to their final mark.

As to the methodology applied, we used the quantitative method by administering online questionnaires. We also approached this project differently in order to see if our research hypotheses 2 and 3 are true or not. As such, we had a control group at the Faculty of European Studies and an experimental group at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences.

Our control group was made up of the students enrolled at the Faculty of European Studies in the first year of studies, namely six groups of students studying International Relations and European Studies - in Romanian, English, and German; one studying European Administration in Romanian; and one Management in Romanian. In all cases at this faculty, we worked with multi-level classes. They received specialised texts to read, which were related to the unit previously studied in class. The language instructor chose the texts for them and sent them approximately one week before the English class; therefore, they did not have the possibility of choosing their own texts to read in silence. Irrespective of their level, all the students had the same specialised texts to read. Communication with this group was carried out via email and students had the possibility of using their mobile phones to carry out the activity while in class.

In the case of our experimental group, we involved the first-year students enrolled at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (i.e. four groups of students studying Psychology). After having obtained the results on the initial placement test, students were divided into groups according to the level obtained (intermediate or advanced). Students in the experimental group were given total autonomy in choosing their own texts to read, but they again had to be related to the unit studied in class the previous week. In this case, communication was carried out via Facebook groups and these students were also allowed to use their mobile phones / tablets to carry out the activity during the English course.

In both cases, the English course was mandatory and for passing the end of semester test, each student obtained 3 ECTS. At the Faculty of European Studies, our classes focused on Business English (for Management) and European Studies English (for the other majors), some units being similar (e.g. Unit 1. *Communication*), others being completely different (e.g.: Unit 2. *International Marketing for Management*, but Unit 2. *Human Right. Discrimination* for the other majors). At the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, our classes focused on English for psychology, where we worked on units connected with this field of study (e.g. Unit 1. *What is Psychology?*, Unit 2. *The Branches of Psychology*, Unit 3. *Social Psychology*).

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3. Analysis of SSR Activity Performance

3.1. Traditional Means of Communication versus SNS Communication

As nowadays students' personal life and academic life are strongly connected to the digital environment we aimed at testing their performance of SSR in connection to the traditional means of communication in comparison with the online communication on Facebook. As such, to validate/invalidate our research hypotheses, we carried out our project by setting up two groups: a control one (the students at the Faculty of European Studies) and an experimental one (the students at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences). The control group received all reading texts by email, whereas the experimental one received the materials via Facebook. Furthermore, all students who got actively involved in our activity were rewarded with some extra points at the final mark.

a. Control group

For our control group, we used the (already) traditional email as means of communicating. Students' email addressed were collected during the first two weeks of school of the semester, when they had to take the diagnostic test.

After having gathered and centralised all the email addresses of the students who took the test, every week, all the groups received the unit to be studied, as well as the text to read in class, which was related to the unit studied the previous week. Therefore, communication via email was done on a weekly basis for the sending of the necessary materials, and approximately twice or thrice a week we communicated with students individually if they had any additional questions about the units or materials sent.

Through this control group we wanted to see if students still use emails as means of communicating with their professors, and if traditional email is still an efficient way of keeping in touch with them.

b. Experimental group

We decided to use Facebook with the experimental group because students like activities which involve their smartphones, new media and online social networks. Using Facebook for the ESP class makes the students engaged and their level of interest is higher because they communicate on a platform which allows for informality and friendlier communication both with the other students and with the language instructor. This leads to a form of social bonding and phatic communication which increases students' confidence and helps them in the learning process because they feel more relaxed. Students already spend a lot of time on Facebook, so by integrating the platform in our teaching process, we only put in a learning context what students already do (see Cotoc, 2012: 112).

We created Facebook groups for the students at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences and achieved communication via posts and comments, but also via private messages. Using the Facebook posts these students were notified by the teacher on a regular basis about the text that they had to bring in class the following course. As such, Facebook posts were meant to act both as motivational factors, and as teasers for the SSR activity that followed.

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3.2. The choice of texts

The topics and the content of the ESP course implies always a very keen observational process and needs analysis from the part of the ESP instructors. In this respect, they can consult the students' curriculum, address the instructors of their specialised course and/or use the students as experts. Hence, in the case of the SSR activity as well, we decided to use two different strategies in choosing the texts under focus with the aim of seeing whether the results obtained would differ: in the case of the control group, the language instructor indicated the texts to be read and in the case of the experimental group the students choose the text.

a. Control group

As the traditional environment is usually connected to a more controlled and guided teaching-learning process, we decided to indicate students in the control group what texts to read in class. As such, our selection of texts is the following:

For the students enrolled at the following specialisations: **International Relations and European Studies** (Romanian, English, and German lines of study) and European Administration: Unit 2. Human Rights. Discrimination → Reading 1. *The European Union - events of 2016* and Reading 2. *Ratko Mladic jailed for life over Bosnia war genocide*;Unit 3. Languages in the E.U. → Reading 3. *After Brexit, EU English will be free to morph into a distinct variety*; Unit 4. The European Union. History and Institutions → Reading 4. *Brexit deal: Theresa May's agreement with Brussels.*

For the students studying **Management**, our selection of texts was: Unit 1. International Marketing → Reading 1. *A Brief History of Branding*;Unit 2. Building Relationships → Reading 2. *Good News for Young Strivers: Networking is Overrated*;Unit 3. Success → Reading 3. *Six ways to measure small business success*; Unit 4. Job Satisfaction → Reading 4. *Can a job title change your behaviour?*

b. Experimental group

In the case of the experimental group, having in mind the learner-centered approach and the democracy, autonomy and freedom promoted by the sns, the students were treated as experts and were supposed to act as autonomous and responsible learners. They had to choose their own texts without any guidance from the part of the instructor who only indicated the topic, but it was the students who had to perform an online search, apply their critical thinking skills and select a text that was connected to the topic and that they were interested in. They performed the SSR without being asked what texts they choose, and the instructor acted as an observer and a SSR participant, without interfering or commenting on the students' choices, without evaluating the students choices of texts as being adequate or not.

An example of the students' choices in relation to the topics discussed in class in the previous week: unit Branches of Psychology → Reading 1. Kenneth J. Sher & Tim Trull - *Clinical Psychology*; Unit Social Psychology → Reading 2. *Social psychology* from simplypsychology.org; Unit Group Psychology → Reading 3. Stanley Milgram - *Behavioral Study on Obedience*; Unit Education → Reading 4. Susan L. Renes - *Global Voices in Higher Education*; Unit Brain and Behaviour → Reading 5. Mark F. Bear, Barry W. Connors, Michael A. Paradiso - *Neuroscience Exploring the Brain* - 2015.

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3.3 Survey Analysis First Semester

Methodology

The final stage of our SSR project included the administration of an online questionnaire to the students involved in our activity. Therefore, to carry out our survey, we opted for the quantitative research because a well-designed quantitative study helps us "not just to look at what happens, but to provide an explanation of why it happens as well" (Mujis 2004: 10).

First, in the preliminary stage, we established the purpose of our research, i.e. to evaluate the SSR activity carried out during the English class. Second, we set the following research objectives: (1) to determine if students feel they improved their vocabulary; (2) to determine if students feel they improved their knowledge of the topics studied; (3) to determine their attitude towards the SSR activity; (4) to determine their perception of the SSR. Third, we made sure our research objectives match our research hypotheses (see 1. Project Motivation and Hypotheses).

In the designing stage, we elaborated the questionnaire, which was divided into two (2) parts. Part 1 contained eleven (11) questions meant to cover all the above-mentioned research questions. We opted for a shorter questionnaire because students get easily distracted and the longer the questionnaire, the lower the response rate. Part 2 contained questions about the respondent. We chose to administer this questionnaire in a Google form for the students to fill in alone, as it has been proven that "because there is no interviewer there is less social desirability bias and the respondents answer more honestly" (Brace 2008: 44).

As to the questions included in the questionnaire, we chose to use open, closed, and open-ended questions in order to obtain as much information as possible about the students' perception of the activity. Consequently, the questionnaire we designed was quite well-balanced, containing six (6) open questions, three (3) closed questions, as well as two (2) open-ended questions.

4. Preliminary Results

The online questionnaire was filled in by a total number of 176 students (105 students from the control group, and 71 from the experimental group). Therefore, we can say that the results of the survey we carried out are relevant since more than half of our total number of students (339 students – experimental group: 154 students, control group: 185 students) filled in our questionnaire.

In analysing our results, we divided the first part of our questionnaire into four sections, meant to provide us with pertinent answers for the four research objectives and three hypotheses we established at the beginning of our research:

- **Research objectives (1)** to determine if students feel they improved their vocabulary and **research objective(2)** to determine if students feel they improved their knowledge of the topics studied → **Research Hypothesis 1 (RH 1)**: students improve their reading skills if they read more in English → **Questionnaire Question(s)Q2**: *What have you learnt from the texts you read in terms of vocabulary? Give examples of words and/of phrases you learnt from the texts you read*; **Q3**: *Was the activity useful for vocabulary acquisition? (1 - not at all, 2 - somewhat useful, 3 - neither useful, nor useless, 4 - useful, 5 - very useful);* **Q4**: *What have you learnt from the texts you read in terms of content? Give examples of new ideas/knowledge you acquired*; **Q5**: (*Has this activity enriched your knowledge of the topics you read about? (1 - not at all, 2 - to a small extent, 3 - to a moderate extent, 4 - to a fairly great extent, 5 - to a high extent)*
- **Research objective(3)** to determine their attitude towards the SSR activity → **RH 2**: the results of SSR are better if students are allowed to choose their own texts to

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read → **Q6**: *What did you like about our activity?*; **Q7**: *What did you dislike about our activity?*

- **Research objective(4)** to determine their perception of the SSR → **RH 3**: students' motivation to carry out this type of activity increase if they are stimulated to read → **Q8**: *Was the activity useful? (1 - not at all, 2 - somewhat useful, 3 - neither useful, nor useless, 4 - useful, 5 - very useful);* **Q9**: *Would you like to continue this activity in the 2nd semester?;* **Q10**: *If you answered 'yes' to the above question, would you like to make any recommendations to improve this activity next semester?*

As such, the first section was meant to check the students' knowledge of the texts they read in class during SSR and to determine if students feel they improved their vocabulary (Q1: *Write the titles and the authors of the texts you read*; Q2, Q3). The second section the purpose of which was to determine if students feel they improved their knowledge of the topics studied included questions 4 and 5. Section three was drafted to determine the students' attitude towards the SSR activity, by asking them the questions **Q6**, **Q7**. Last but not least, the fourth section of our questionnaire set as purpose to determine students' perception of the SSR. Therefore, they had to answer questions **8**; **9**; **10**.

4.1. Validation/Invalidation of Research Hypotheses

Research hypothesis 1 (students improve their reading skills if they read more in English) was checked through two research objectives, namely (1) to determine if students feel they improved their vocabulary, and (2) to determine if students feel they improved their knowledge of the topics studied.

Following the analysis of the students' answers to our questions (Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5) we can firmly state that 173 out of 176 respondents said they learnt new vocabulary and exemplified. Therefore, we can conclude that our research hypothesis 1 is valid.

Research hypothesis 2 (RH2) (the results of SSR are better if students are allowed to choose their own texts to read)led us to a paradoxical situation as there were students in the control group who claimed that they would have preferred to choose the texts/topics themselves, whereas some students in the experimental group claimed that it would have been more efficient to receive the text in advance.Hence, we can conclude that our research hypothesis 2 is not valid.

Research hypothesis 3 (RH3) (students' motivation to carry out this type of activity increase if they are stimulated to read) was checked by the questions which addressed the students' perception of the SSR (questions 8, 9, and 10). Hence, 89.8% of the students stated that the activity was useful and very useful (see Fig. 1 below).

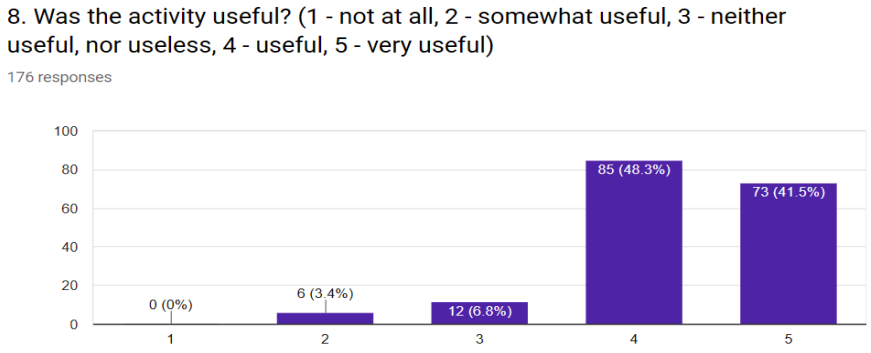

Fig. 1

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When addressed the question if they would like to continue the activity in the second semester, 88.7% of the responds gave a positive answer. Out of these 88.7%, 50.6% of them said they would like to continue it for the entire second semester and 38.1% said that they would be interested in this activity for a short period of time.Therefore, we can conclude that our research hypothesis 3 (students' motivation to carry out this type of activity increase if they are stimulated to read) can be validated.

4.2 Perception and Attitudes

As H. Douglas Brown put it, "perception is always subjective" as it "involves the filtering of information even before it is stored in memory, resulting in a selective form of consciousness" and it often results in stereotyping (Brown 2007: 189). The concept of 'stereotyping' "implies some type of attitude towards the culture or language in question" (Brown 2007: 192); consequently, we can say that perception, stereotyping, and attitudes are closely connected.

Students' perceptions of and attitudes to new activities greatly influence their performance in the English class. If they are not drawn to one activity from the very beginning, they quickly lose their interest in carrying out the next time. We have such an example. For instance, for Q2: *What have you learnt from the texts you read in terms of vocabulary? Give examples of words and/of phrases you learnt from the texts you read*, one student studying at the Faculty of European Studies answered: "Obviously not much... I have read the first one at the start of the year and i found it so easy that it made me lose interest... Also sorry for my honesty and i hope I'm not out of line", although, when asked to answer Q1: *Write the titles and the authors of the texts you read*, the same student wrote that "No idea what we had to read during the clases because I did not check". However, this was a singular case among our respondents, but it can be an example of a student's attitude towards an activity carried out in class, which was obviously related to their attitude towards a new activity, or, why not, towards an English class.

Overall, however, students' perception and attitude towards the SSR activity were positive, as can be seen in the analyses below.

- **Perception in terms of Vocabulary Acquisition**

Students perceived the activity as being useful in terms of vocabulary acquisition, the vast majority of them declaring that it was useful and very useful (157 students out of 176 students), 11 students out of 176 responds declared that it was neither useful, not useless; 7 students found it somewhat useful and only one student considered that the activity wasn't of any use (see Fig. 2 below).

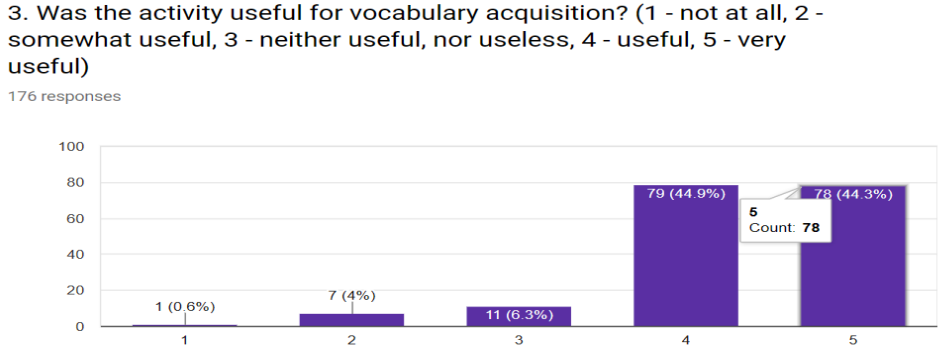

Fig. 2

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- **Perception in terms of Enriching Specialised Knowledge**

In what specialised content is concerned, we noticed that 133 students perceived the activity as being useful and very useful, 36 students considered it neutre in this respect, 6 students considered the activity to be enriching only to a moderate extent and only 1 student found it completely useless (see Fig. 3 below).

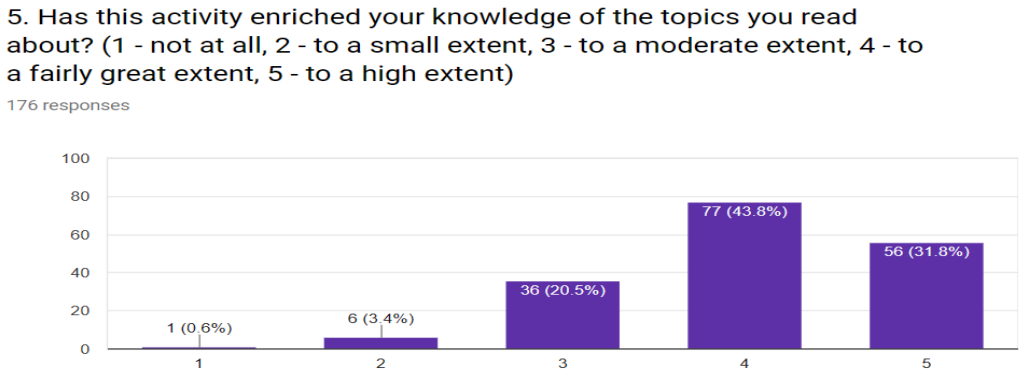

Fig. 3

- **Likes and Dislikes**

The part dedicated to the open questions confirmed that our SSR for a Month activity was well received by the students, as they felt they learnt new vocabulary and they also found out new interesting things about what is happening around the world today. We provide a selective list of their answers:

- **Likes**:

Actually I don't like the reading itself, but I can not deny that it is a great way to enrich our knownledge and vocabulary.

I consider this activity to be very useful for training our ability of understanding texts in a different language and also to stock information from this extensive subjects that the texts were talking about.

I have nothing to complain about, it was very useful

There isn't something that I dislike about this activity because I like to learn new things or discover somthing new about something that i fing intresting.

Dislike? Oh, but every hour of studying was very useful for me. I can't wait the next semester.

- **Dislikes:** *I think the time was too short; It's not that I dislike our activity, but I do not like that it's very hard for me to understand the texts; I disliked the fact that some texts were a little too long; I disliked because some texts had too much information and I couldn't process them in an optimal time.*

4.3 Students' motivation & involvement

Unsurprisingly, not all of students complied with the requirements for this activity all the time, but we easily found a solution so that the activity was always carried out without disturbing or interrupting the other colleagues. For instance, in the case of the experimental group, some of them failed to bring a text to read in which case they rapidly found one online, using their

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smartphones devices (with the drawback of wasting some minutes which were supposed to be dedicated to the actual reading) or they engaged in the SSR by reading the text brought by a colleague. However, overall, the large majority of students fulfilled their obligations related to this activity and they were motivated to take part in the SSR because it allowed them to deepen their knowledge in their fields of study, but they were also driven by the instrumental motivation (see Gardner and Lambert, 1972) since they wanted to have a good end of semester mark (they would receive 0.5 points to the final grade).

4.4 Problems encountered

Although they were provided with a lot of explanations at the beginning and during the activity, some students still failed to meet the requirements or understand the purpose and the intentions of the SSR. For instance:

- Some students declared that they would have prefered shorter texts because this would have allowed them to finish the SSR in the classroom, but the texts were not meant to be finished in the classroom;
- Some of them declared that they would have liked to solve vocabulary exercises with words from the text / to discuss unfamiliar words. Still, the main focus was not the unknown words, but an overall understanding of the text;
- Some students said that they would have liked to discuss ideas from the texts, failing to understand that the purpose of the activity was not to trigger debates/discussions, but to arise their interest and curiosity so that they continue at home.

In the control group, some students failed to carry out the activity as they said they did not receive the texts by email; other students (especially the English line of study) did not get involved in the activity so much because some of them think their level of English is proficient and they do not need to improve their vocabulary or knowledge of certain topics; even so, instead of reading a text of their own choice, they preferred to play games on their mobile phones.

In the experimental group, some students failed to find and bring a text; some of the students who skipped courses were confused and they did not know what text to choose; there were students who read a text that would be discussed later on in class but was not meant for the SSR; some students used their smartphones saying that they are doing the SSR, but they were engaged in something else (chatting, facebooking, playing games, etc.)

5. Conclusions

This project represents a pilot study and started out as an experiment aimed at seeing the role of reading in the ESP course and the students' involvement in an activity which requires them to stay concentrated in an activity in an uninterrupted, sustained and responsible way while being involved in this project using the traditional email in opposition with the communication on SNS. Nevertheless, regardless of these two opposing means of communication, the results obtained were the same with the control group and with the experimental group.

In what our research hypotheses are concerned, two of them were validated and one was invalidated: students improve their reading skills if they read more in English and their attitudes to reading in English and their motivation to carry out this type of activity increase if they are stimulated to read, but the students' freedom in choosing the texts for the SSR does not influence the results as we have predicted.

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This activity should be implemented in a scaffolded way as students gain autonomy and critical thinking as the academic year unfolds. That is why, the SSR should offer students gradual freedom in terms of choice texts and engagement and, as such, starting out as a guided and controlled activity and ending as a totally autonomous one.

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