

Involving Technical University Learners in an EFL Reading Course: A Socio-cultural and Cooperative Approach

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Abstract: This paper reports the results of a reading course theoretically underpinned by socio-cultural theory as well as the notion of cooperative learning. The aim of the instructional program was to engage the low proficiency and low-motivated EFL learners in reading by exposing them to several types of activities when reading Ann Holm's novel, "I'm David" as the reading text. Data were collected from threading logs and a student perception questionnaire to investigate the effectiveness of learning, learners' attitude and belief towards reading, and learners' reactions towards the class activities. Results indicated that learners' reactions to this designed course were positive and the learners benefited not only in linguistic development, but also in personal growth. Some pedagogical implications and the limitations were also discussed.

Key words: learner involvement, EFL reading, socio-cultural theory, cooperative learning

Introduction

Low motivation and engagement in learning has been a long-lasting and widespread problem among the technical university learners³ in an EFL reading class. One of the challenges facing EFL teachers is how to motivate students with low self-esteem and motivation to read English and be involved in the reading process.

In an attempt to motivate our students and help them be more involved in reading English materials, the teacher-researcher decided to implement a class methodology which would be more engaging for students to participate in their learning. It was assumed that as good readers continue to gain reading skills through extra practice, the poor readers' skills remain stagnant because they avoid engagement in reading tasks (Quirk, 2004). The course was designed under the accepted belief that learning has to be done by the learners and it should be encouraged and guided (Van Lier, 1996) because for decades, the shift in teaching methodology has gone from teacher-centered classroom toward more student-oriented learning (Nunan, 1999). Moreover, as indicated by Vygotsky (1978), learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with other peers. Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy that provides the social structure for learners to work cooperatively in groups (Calderon, 1999). It is through this collaboration and support that students learn from one another, remain on task, and enhance their socialization and interpersonal skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1993).

This paper presents the concepts underlying the principles of socio-cultural theory as well as the notion of collaborative learning together with some classroom activities and

³ Technical university learners in Taiwan refer to those in technological and vocational education system, who are found to be less skilled and less efficient readers (Joe, 1995), when compared with their counterparts in the general universities

practical suggestions for teaching reading in an EFL classroom. It also hoped to present the learners' preferences to classroom activities and then examine the impact of the reading program on the EFL low proficient learners. This study addressed the following questions:

Does a reading course designed with a social-cultural and cooperative approach increase the EFL less-skilled and less-motivated students' engagement in reading? How are the EFL learners' preferences to classroom activities?

Does a reading course designed with a social-cultural and cooperative approach have impact on the EFL less-skilled and less-motivated students?

Literature Review

Sociocultural theory has been applied to provide an explanatory framework for understanding the notions of how learners develop their language competence through interactive pedagogical practices. The belief central to Vygotsky's theory is that human beings are social beings and thus, social interaction and cultural institutions, such as school, classroom, etc., play important roles in facilitating an individual's growth and development (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). Analyzing the data from the written texts of forty reflective portfolios, Donato, Antonek, and Tucker (1994) lent their support to the Vygotskian theory, suggesting that the development of language learning strategies is mainly a by-product of mediation and socialization into a community of language learning practice. In other words, it implies that learners are not isolated individuals and learning can be enhanced in a sociocultural environment. This concept is linked with what Richard (2001) claimed that language learning is itself a dynamic process. It was further pointed out that language learning is not just an individual psychological process but is also a social process (Morita, 2000).

Thus, the sociocultural perspective sheds light on the importance of classroom interaction. Vygotsky (1978) believed that learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with other peers. The Vygotskian approach provided a theoretical framework that helped Takahashi (1998) capture the concept of the 'processes' of young Japanese learners' transformation from interpersonal experience to intrapersonal functions signifies the children's growth through social interaction with peers (Takahashi, 1998). Her findings reported that the students conquered their difficulties and increased development in their discourse and linguistic level. Evidences showed that students' participation in classroom and cooperative/collaborative interaction help expand their actual level to their potential level, under the guidance given by the teacher and the peers. That is, for the learners in the EFL context, the non-native teachers or the other learners are the basis for most of their interaction (Pica, et al., 1996). Small group discussion or role plays are the common activities used for greater verbal exchange among the learners.

From sociocultural perspective, reading is more than decoding. The readers have to make sense in their own minds of what the writing is saying, which is the intermental dialogue. They also need to construct their own representation of the author's message through intramental dialogue (Yang & Wilson, 2006). Yang and Wilson (2006) proposed several strategies to show how the social constructivist theory can be translated into

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action for teaching reading in an EFL classroom. According to Yang and Wilson (2006), students need to have a clear idea why they are reading and read for their own purpose. Teacher's modeling helps students to enter into dialogue with the text. Asking questions that focus on text awareness rather than text content leads the students to engage more interactively with the text and help them to become independent readers. Additionally, students benefit from the teaching which integrates the four skills. Most importantly, critical text analysis is not only a more motivating activity, but also a much better appreciation of text linguistically and culturally. In conclusion, the socialcultural approach to reading draws students into energetic participation in the reading process (Yang & Wilson, 2006).

Cooperative learning, a specific kind of collaborative learning, is an instructional strategy that provides the social structure for learners to work cooperatively in groups. In cooperative learning, students work together in small groups on a structured activity. In small groups, they can share strengths and also develop their weaker skills. In addition, they develop their interpersonal skills. It is a way for students to learn essential interpersonal life-skills and to develop the ability to work collaboratively-- a skill now greatly in demand in the workplace. Within cooperative activities individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to themselves and beneficial to all other group members. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. The research results show that students who have opportunities to work collaboratively, learn faster and more efficiently, have greater retention, and feel more positive about the learning experience (Calderon, 1999). The positive effects that cooperation have on so many important outcomes makes cooperative learning as one of the most valuable tools educators have today.

To summarize, the notions of socio-culture and cooperation help explain how a language is a product of social interaction. Learning is never simply a process of transfer or assimilation; learners develop linguistically and socially during the interaction.

Methodology

Participants

Eighty-six students from two classes in a technical university of Taiwan enrolled in an eighteen-week reading class in the second semester of academic year 2006. Technical university learners in Taiwan refer to those in technological and vocational education system, who are defined as relatively inadequate in their vocabulary size, grammar knowledge, strategy use (Lin, 1995; Ou, 1997). Additionally, when compared with the learners in the general universities, those in the technical universities have found to be less skilled and less efficient readers (Joe, 1995). They are relatively low motivated, less proficient, and less-skilled in their academic performance.

Teaching Material

The reading material selected for the learners was Ann Holm's "*I am David*," an inspiring novel, with eight chapters, written for children of about 9 to 13. It describes a twelve-year-old boy's struggling to cope with an entirely strange world after escaping from an Eastern European concentration camp where he has spent most of his life. This

novel was appropriate for the subjects due to its low density of unknown words and high inspiration for class discussions. Another motivation-supporting factor was that it came together with a DVD, a useful visual aid to increase motivation of learners in language learning (Zanon, 2006).

The Instructional Program

There is evidence indicating the link between academic achievement and time on task (Brewster & Fager, 2000). Therefore, it is necessary to expose the learners to a wide range of different activities, which would appeal to their different cognitive and learning styles. In the first week, the instructor introduced the course requirement and provided background information on the story and then the students watched the movie, a film version of "I am David." Afterward, they were grouped with five members in each and there were totally eight groups. Each group was responsible for presenting a chapter of this novel. However, every student needed to read at home in order to get involved in the discussion.

Each week, they had to read approximately 15 pages. They worked on a chapter (approximately 30 pages) collaboratively with their teacher and classmates every two weeks. Two weeks (four hours) was allotted for a chapter. In the first two hour, the teacher developed some questions for pre-reading discussions to keep all the students involved in reading, not just those who were required to present the story. Then she gave the students the vocabulary list, indicating some highly frequent words. The exercise types included cloze tests and circling the correct usage of words. The pre-reading activity aimed to help the low-skilled learners deal with their vocabulary problems. With the guided questions (*Appendix I*) on the worksheet, every student read alone at home and then met the group members to prepare for the classroom activities, which were described in the next section. In the next two hours, a group of students presented what they read, shared their reading logs, presented their questions, and led the discussions.

Classroom Activities

Each of the activities was allotted a certain percentage of the grading criteria. Understanding the learners' psychological burden from learning, the teacher reduced the weight of written tests, such as vocabulary quizzes, summary writing, and summaries. The written tests/assignments counted for 50% of the total grade, and 50% corresponded to those done orally by the students during/out of the classes (i.e. questions & answers, group presentations, personal reflections, and on-line sharing). The activities were categorized into teacher-student collaboration, student-student cooperation, and individual work.

1. Teacher-student conference:

The less-skilled and low motivated learners need assistance before and during the class. Every week before the group presentation, each group of the students met the teacher to check their comprehension and solve the linguistic problems. Another purpose was to keep the students on the track because the low motivated learners often avoid reading; they needed teachers to urge and encourage them to read.

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2. Student-Student Cooperation:

● *Personal reflections/reading logs:*

To support the students' engagement with the story, a reader-response prompt with questions shown below was given to each group for discussions in class. Each of the students were requested to respond to the questions on the prompts and one of them (i.e., the group recorder) wrote a short essay in 30-50 words for each guided question. The activity aimed to help the students construct meaning from the text by rethinking the plot, characters and themes in more critical way. Those prompts, guiding the students' thinking after they read, are listed as follows:

1. Which characters do you like / dislike most? Why or why not?
2. Do you share any feelings of characters in the story? Explain.
3. What does this story (characters, incidents, or ideas) remind you of in your own life?

● *Oral presentation& Discussions:*

Another activity which involved the students required them to create Power Points visual aids and to present them in class. Each group chose its own focus for the presentation. Some summarized the story and added their own interpretation; others presented the story along with comments critiquing the main characters or plots in the story. The activity not only contributed to their understanding of the reading texts, but also provided them with the opportunity to speak up. During the follow-up discussions, the leading group outlined the main ideas for the assigned chapter and asked the audience for additional opinions.

● *Question & Answer:*

Every student developed one or two questions for what they read each week. They met before class and decided the most appropriate questions to be presented in class for discussions. They led the discussion and called the others to give answers. They apparently felt more confident in their ability to lead the class and, consequently, the class became more interactive.

3. Individual Work--Summary writing:

When the students finished their reading assignment per week, each of them had to write a half-page story summary as a way of evaluation on their engagement in reading. Each student should hand in eight summaries after this reading course. Students benefited greatly from borrowing liberally from model texts (the novel) in creating their own texts, which was a learning approach for EFL learners. For most students, this was the first time they had homework to be proud of because they had never written in English before. They improved their vocabulary and sentence structures. Moreover, they felt themselves as capable learners.

Data Collection Procedures & Data Analysis

A Student Perception Questionnaire was conducted after the instructional program to examine the effectiveness of learning, the students' attitude and belief towards reading, and their reactions towards the class activities. The students responded to the questions by indicating "agree" or "disagree" on the five-scale survey. Following the questionnaire

were three open-ended questions in which the students described their difficulties (if any) when reading this novel and elaborated more on why they found certain activities to be helpful.

The data from questionnaire were analyzed by looking into the frequency of responses on each item and was presented in percentages. The items that received the highest percentages of response in the top three ranking were identified, followed by the others.

Two raters analyzed the students' reading logs/reflective journals, following the process of qualitative analysis which involves identifying, coding and categorizing (Patton, 1990). The analysis centered on the descriptions of the students' preference to the characters, feelings shared with the characters in the story and personal reflections on their own experiences. The researcher examined the collected written entries, marking and listing the needed results. Another teacher scrutinized the first results and provided questions for further examination. All the responses could be written in either Chinese or English. Then the data were translated into English for a consistent language use in this paper. The researcher and the teacher compared the Chinese and English versions to reconfirm the translation. Data were examined and compared several times before final conclusions were drawn. Many major themes emerged from the analysis for discussion.

Results

The results are presented as: (1) results from the Student Perception Questionnaire, and (2) results from the reading logs /reflective journals.

Results from Student Perception Questionnaire for Research Question 1

Table 1 presents the results of frequency distribution on the Student Perception Questionnaire. The majority of the students reported their development in reading ability (Strongly Agree 5.8%; Agree 68.6%), vocabulary (Strongly Agree 15.1%; Agree 52.3%), reading fluency (Strongly Agree 9.3%; Agree 60.5%), reading speed (Strongly Agree 10.5%; Agree 60.5%), and reading motivation (Strongly Agree 5.9%; Agree 47.7%). Although 38.8% of the students felt uncertain about their improvement in reading motivation, there were more students (43.6% = Strongly Agree 5.9% + Agree 47.7%) who felt positive than those who disagreed (Disagree 10.6% + Strongly Disagree 0%). With regards to the overall reading programme, over sixty percent of (63.5% = Strongly Agree 10.6% + Agree 52.9%) the students considered the reading class to be more meaningful than before. However, while 55.8% of the students felt uncertain about their improvement in writing, only 29% thought they improved in this skill.

With regards to the attitude and belief toward reading, the majority of the students (55.3% = Strongly Agree 5.9% + Agree 49.4%) showed their willingness to continue reading, compared to 1.2% of them felt otherwise did not. Moreover, 71.8% (Strongly Agree 10.6% + Agree 61.2%) of the students felt positively that reading a great deal of interesting and comprehensive books improves their reading ability and agreed that extensive reading should be integrated into the reading course (62.2% = Strongly Agree 14.1% + Agree 47.1%).

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Table 1 also revealed the learners' positive response toward the class activities. While there were a high percentage of the students reported uncertain, the percentage of the students who indicated agreement was higher than those who showed disagreement. Although 55.8% of the students felt uncertain about their improvement in writing (I), 58.6% of them considered that summary writing is helpful (Strongly Agree 15.9% + Agree 42.7%). Another interesting finding was that over half of the students (Agree 50.8%) reported that they greatly benefited from oral presentation, while fewer of them felt comfortable with creating questions (Agree 33.8%) and presenting personal reflection. However, it is important to note that the majority of the students considered student-student cooperation (57.8%=Strongly Agree 50.0%+ Agree 7.8%) and student-teacher collaboration (65.0%=Strongly Agree 15.7%+Agree 49.4%) to be positive for their reading course, while only 12.5% and 6.0% of them indicated their disagreement. Results suggest that the less skilled and less motivated learners felt they need help from the teacher to read "between and beyond the lines," while they indicated their preferences to the student-student cooperative learning.

Table 1 Results of Frequency Distribution on Student Perception Questionnaire

I. Sense of Improvement	Response	Frequency	Percentage
I improved my ability in reading for meaning.	SA	5	5.8%
	A	59	68.6%
	U	22	25.6%
	D	0	0%
	SD	0	0%
I improved in my vocabulary development.	SA	13	15.1%
	A	45	52.3%
	U	26	30.2%
	D	2	2.3%
	SD	0	0%
I can read more fluently than before.	SA	8	9.3%
	A	52	60.5%
	U	24	27.9%
	D	2	2.3%
	SD	0	0%
I can read faster than before.	SA	9	10.5%
	A	52	60.5%
	U	21	24.4%
	D	3	3.5%
	SD	1	1.2%
I feel improved in writing.	SA	7	8.1%
	A	18	20.9%
	U	48	55.8%
	D	11	12.8%
	SD	2	2.3%
I feel more motivated to read than before.	SA	5	5.9%
	A	38	47.7%
	U	33	38.8%
	D	9	10.6%
	SD	0	0%

I feel my reading class more meaningful than before.	SA	9	10.6%
	A	45	52.9%
	U	23	27.1%
	D	8	9.4%
	SD	0	0%
II. Attitude & Belief	Response	Frequency	Percentage
I will continue to read as a means of language development.	SA	5	5.9%
	A	42	49.4%
	U	37	43.5%
	D	1	1.2%
	SD	0	0%
To read a great deal of interesting and comprehensive books is important to improve my reading ability.	SA	9	10.6%
	A	52	61.2%
	U	22	25.9%
	D	2	2.4%
	SD	0	0%
I think that extensive reading should be integrated into the reading course.	SA	12	14.1%
	A	40	47.1%
	U	30	35.3%
	D	3	3.5%
	SD	0	0%
III. Reaction toward class activities	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Summary writing from reading is helpful to me.	SA	13	15.9%
	A	35	42.7%
	U	26	31.7%
	D	8	9.8%
	SD	0	0%
Oral report is helpful to me.	SA	4	6.3%
	A	32	50.8%
	U	20	31.7%
	D	6	9.5%
	SD	1	1.6%
Your Own Question and Answer is helpful to me.	SA	2	3.1%
	A	22	33.8%
	U	33	50.8%
	D	8	12.3%
	SD	0	0%
Personal Response is helpful to me.	SA	3	4.8%
	A	27	42.8%
	U	26	41.3%
	D	7	11.1%
	SD	0	0%
Student-student Cooperation is helpful to me.	SA	5	7.8%
	A	32	50.0%
	U	19	29.7%
	D	8	12.5%
	SD	0	0%
Student-teacher collaboration is helpful to me.	SA	13	15.7%
	A	41	49.4%
	U	24	28.9%
	D	5	6.0%
	SD	0	0%

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9	10.6%
45	52.9%
23	27.1%
8	9.4%
0	0%
Frequency	Percentage
5	5.9%
42	49.4%
37	43.5%
1	1.2%
0	0%
9	10.6%
52	61.2%
22	25.9%
2	2.4%
0	0%
12	14.1%
40	47.1%
30	35.3%
3	3.5%
0	0%
Frequency	Percentage
13	15.9%
35	42.7%
26	31.7%
8	9.8%
0	0%
4	6.3%
32	50.8%
20	31.7%
6	9.5%
1	1.6%
2	3.1%
22	33.8%
33	50.8%
8	12.3%
0	0%
3	4.8%
27	42.8%
26	41.3%
7	11.1%
0	0%
5	7.8%
32	50.0%
19	29.7%
8	12.5%
0	0%
13	15.7%
41	49.4%
24	28.9%
5	6.0%
0	0%

Results from the Reading Logs⁴/ Reflective Journals for Research Question 2

Analysis of the reading logs emerged several major themes revealing the learners' growth as follows:

1. Active Reading Tasks Serves As Vicarious Experience for Personal Growth and Evaluation of Value

In the study, the students encountered the values the characters lived by, in responding to the second prompt question "Do you share any of the feelings of the characters in this story?" Some students judged the characters' behaviours and furthermore compared those behaviours with theirs in real life. Through sharing and evaluating, different images of life, each student reader showed sympathy and antipathy for the characters who were quite different from himself or herself and then built his or her own sense of values. For example, some students were able to experience vicariously the emotion of David and compared David's torturing experiences with theirs, by reacting "I wouldn't be as brave as David to get through all his hardships."

To show their reaction to the question "What kind of person would you be if you had spent your life in a concentration camp?" Some students expressed their feeling "How terrible! I think I would loathe living in such dark and lifeless place. I would rather risk my life to find my hope as David did."

Through reading the literary work, students were offered a chance to evaluate moral values. When reacting to the question, "Imagine you were David. Please describe David's feelings and thought when staying in this magnificent house." Some students were able to understand what the main character David faced by sharing David's problems and showing their concerns. They responded, "If I were David, I must have huge conflict in my mind. On one hand, I would hope to stay together with Maria, who has a magnificent house, rich and loving parents, and brothers. However, I would still feel uncertain about people in the house, as the book shows on page 132. I think David would feel unpleasant because he had stayed in an isolated place- a concentration camp-since he was born." The students learned to formulate reasons for the personal dilemmas of one character: the upbringing of each effect on their characters.

2. Summary Writing and Reflective Journals Motives the Learners to Read and Write

To further understand the students' reaction to the class activity, analysis of the reflective journals was also conducted at the end of the study. When asked what benefit they gained from involving in the reading course, most of the students reported that reading had served as a resource for what they had to write. They also responded that for them, the reading-to-writing activity was meaningful because they were able to find something to write. They also found it helpful as they made connections to ideas and themes expressed in what they read.

"I've never believed that I can write so much. You know....I often write one or two sentences and I just stop there without any idea to write..."

⁴ The responses could be written in Chinese if the students found it difficult to express in English. During the one-to-one conference, the instructor clarified the sentences and helped translate them into English without changing the original meaning.

"When I read the story, I couldn't help but have something to say. So many characters, so many things happen...I found there was a lot in my mind."

Additionally, they realized that the act of writing is thinking about reading which in turn produces writing. As the above statements, they were amazed with their written production as this was their first experience of writing formally and at length. The students reported that reading novels was much more interesting than reading other genres of text such as the expository text. They enjoyed learning language in the way they did in this study because they interacted with their peers and class teacher. They suggested that the instructor should use stories in class instead of the traditional expository texts in the reading textbooks for ESL or EFL learners.

"I'm okay with any materials you brought into the class. But, if you let us read the short stories, there will be fewer classmates sleeping in class. We can also discuss the story and the characters, and try to solve the problems the characters meet."

"To tell the truth, reading novels is more interesting than reading the other articles you provided us in class. I hate the way that we went over the article and then had to remember the vocabulary. It's more exciting to read the story and immerse myself in the world which the characters are in."

Conclusion, Classroom Implications, and Limitation

In conclusion, the socio-cultural and cooperative approach to EFL reading class helps involve the low motivated learners in reading activities and engage them in active dialogue with texts and their peers. All the activities, such as summaries, reflective journals, reading logs, question & answer, and oral presentations, required the students to work individually or collaboratively with their peers and teacher. Socio-cultural and cooperative approach has the fundamental advantage because it enables students to interact with the text and with each other. During the small group work, they were actively communicating with each other and had an opportunity to orally present their opinions and raise questions. The teacher researcher played a role of facilitator, and also participant in the class discussion.

The results of this study implied that EFL less motivated students have to be guided to read beyond the words and they need guidance from the teacher. They often avoid reading; therefore, they need teachers to create a learning environment where they can be engaged as much as they can. By involving themselves in the cooperative reading tasks, the students might feel empowered to break out of the cycle of failure. They might find themselves capable in reading and sharing ideas with the other learners. What the teacher does is to ensure that the course materials relate to students' lives and bridge the gap whenever student readers meet difficulties in understanding the text. The teacher then comments on the story's organization, the characters, and the plot. Most important, the teacher should allow students to have some degree of control over learning. In this study, each group of the students decided what they liked to present and led the discussions in a way they have decided. It is very enlightening for students to see how differently they can make a visual representation of the story.

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It is the teacher's responsibility to motivate reading by providing choice of texts to develop learner autonomy. However, for the sake of evaluation in a large-size class, in this study, the students weren't allowed to select the texts they wanted to read. The results might be more successful if the student's choice of reading texts were implemented in the study.

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Appendix-I: Sample Guided Questions for Discussions:

Chapter 1-Part I

1. How was David arranged to escape?
2. How did David react to man arranging his journey to freedom?
3. How could David climb over the perimeter fence?
4. Did David trust the man immediately?
5. Did he decide to escape? Why?
6. What did David find in the bundle?
7. How did the Italian sailor help David?

Chapter 2-Part II: Questions for Discussion:

1. What do you think a concentration camp is like?
2. What kind of person would you be if you had spent your life in a concentration camp?
3. Why was David not sure whether he would make the attempt to escape?

Chapter 3-Part II.

1. What differences did David find between the camp and the outside world? (p.30)
2. What languages did David learn in the camp? How did he learn them? (p.40)
3. What did David learn when he was struggling to survive in the small town?(p.60)

Chapter 4-Part II.

1. Why didn't David hit the boy back when a boy kicked and hit him? (p.100)
2. Did David feel disappointed with people outside concentration camp after being hit by a boy? How did he feel? (p.101)
- 3.* Imagine you were David. Please describe David's feelings and thought when staying in this magnificent house.

Chapter 8-Part II. Reading Comprehension

1. What brought Maria to David's mind? (p. 220)
2. Where did David manage to earn some money? (p.222)
3. "The long winter had passed, and he was going down to meet the spring." (p.218)
What does this metaphor mean to David? How do YOU feel inspired in your life?

- Part II. Reading Comprehension

1. What brought Maria to David's mind? (p. 220)
2. Where did David manage to earn some money? (p.222)
3. Imagine you were David. Describe what you feel and what you think when you eventually see the woman in the photograph in Denmark.