

論文：

Reading a Book in English the First Time: Student Attitudes to Literary Discussions and Extensive Reading

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Abstract:

A class of first-year Japanese university students at a prefectural university read one graded reader every week for one semester and supplemented that with stories from a book of simplified short stories. They participated in literary discussions in small groups. At the end of the semester students were asked to write their honest comments about the extensive reading and literary discussions and turn the comments in anonymously. Twelve students out of a class of twenty-five responded. The hypothesis was that a combination of extensive reading of simplified, longer texts (graded readers) and literary discussions of short stories would help improve the students' reading rates and comprehension and by extension their English language skills. This article only discusses the students' attitudes to the reading and their own learning.

Key words : Extensive reading, literary discussions, critical thinking skills, graded readers, literature

First year students in the International Department of a prefectural university in Japan prepare to go overseas as exchange students as part of their degree program. The students typically go to North American universities in their third year, so they have two years in which to prepare. One of the most common comments made by returning students is that they were unprepared for the amount of reading they were required to do at the North American schools. The students would also admit they were uncomfortable with the type of verbal exchange expected of them in class, in other words, expressing their own opinions. To address this, this instructor implemented a combined student-selected extensive reading (ER)/guided extensive reading (GER) program for the class. Students chose and read a different graded reader every week and in addition read one story from the Oxford Bookworms Club Stories for Reading Circles Bronze level. Students had the freedom to choose and read graded readers which appealed to them, and also read and discussed assigned short stories in small groups, (literary discussions-

LD), on a fixed schedule.

Extensive Reading

Extensive Reading (ER) has been utilized widely in classrooms around the world, from L1 elementary school classes to university L2 classes. The practice has its proponents and opponents, and each side has its points. This instructor uses it for a number of reasons. Students bring their own cultures, literacies and life experiences to the classroom. Literature helps them explore their own lives and selves. However, students' English language abilities might not be as advanced as necessary to read authentic L2 texts. Graded readers (GR) offer a level-appropriate option to introduce students to L2 culture and pedagogical practice. ER of GRs provides students with not only level-appropriate material, but also needed reading practice. Nation (2015) advocates including ER in L2 programs because overall it is effective. Nation and Waring and McLean (2015) cite the exposure of students to large volumes of target language material. Simply put, reading more

makes students better readers (Beglar, et al., 2012). What is more, ER provides students with sorely needed exposure to the target language in input-poor environments (Al-Homoud & Schmitt, 2009). Students in Japan voice anxiety about reading in English, and ER helps reduce anxiety levels (Yamashita, 2013). Waring and McLean (2015) describe different iterations of ER, one being what they refer to as class reading. In this type of ER, “all students read the same text decided by the teacher, most probably with lots of follow-up and some assessment,” (p. 161). Tan, et al. (2016) used what they call guided extensive reading (GER) to develop more positive attitudes towards reading English in their remedial tertiary students.

Another name for ER is pleasure reading (PR). Ro and Chen (2014) found that L1 reading habits positively correlated with L2 reading frequency. Students who read in L1 are more likely to read in L2. Readers with a positive attitude toward reading read more. Surprisingly, exposure to L2 culture and years of previous L2 study did not statistically impact L2 reading frequency or attitudes (Ro and Chen, 2014). In their study, Tan et al. (2016) used GER, but they also provided their students with a wide range of GR from which to choose. They report that “all of the participants reported that they finished reading each graded reader assigned to them and that the selection covered a wide range of topics” (p.29). Furthermore, “most of them [students] reported that they enjoyed reading the graded readers and found them interesting, informative and easy to follow” (p.29). Ponniah and Priya (2014) found at an Indian university that adult engineering students who read for pleasure tested better on every metric than students who read only for information. Al-Homoud and Schmitt (2009) compared extensive reading and intensive reading (IR) groups. “[P]articipants in the extensive group reported having more positive attitudes towards their learning experience, and gave a stronger indication of learning than the participants in the intensive reading group did” (p. 398). Also, “[t]he extensive group participants held more positive views about their reading development in terms of the following: reading skills, reading comprehension, and reading fluency” (p. 398). Beglar, et al. (2012) investigated reading rates for

Japanese university students studying English. They investigated groups which read for pleasure and groups which read for information. The PR groups’ members made the largest reading rate gains. They also reported the most positive comments about reading in English. Carrell and Carson (1997) make a compelling argument for combining ER and IR to help prepare students for academic English tasks. While a common selling point for ER is an increase in students’ reading rates, Forouzani (2017) actually advocates for slowing students’ reading speed down. Aesthetic reading, or slower reading, contributes positively to reading comprehension, improving critical thinking skills, and making a reader more aware of feelings and context.

Literary Discussions

While literary discussions (LD) were first developed in American primary and secondary schools for L1 students, (Daniels, 2006; Mills & Jennings, 2011), they have become accepted in L2 situations overseas as well (Baurain, 2007; Iskhak, 2016; Kim, 2016). Bedee (2010) showed that American L1 primary students who either listened to teachers read a text aloud and ask questions about it, or, participated in LD were more motivated and understood the text better. In other words, both methods helped students. The debate over whether literature and literacy is as valid a pedagogical goal in L2 programs as oral proficiency rages on, (Rebstock, 2018). This instructor considers the LD, or reading circle (RC), or literature conversation (LC), to be a useful approach for students in the EFL classroom. There is a difference between the standard exchange between teachers demanding students regurgitate what they read in an authoritative manner and a LD. Martin, a French teacher, makes the point that teachers should be aware of the types of questions they ask in a FL class so as not to shut down students conversing about the text being studied (1993). She made the suggestion back in 1993 to include some “small group mini-discussions” in FL classes to encourage more student communication (p. 560). Scott and Huntington advocate teachers guiding student discussions in their L1 to encourage deeper understanding of a L2 text (2007). They do point

out that unguided student discussions in the L1 rarely led to better comprehension of the L2 text due to off-task talk, and this is a possibility in any student-led activity (p. 12).

Gonzalez and Courtland (2009) found that discussing the L2 text, in this case in Spanish, in student groups helped the students recreate the story in their own minds and deepen their conversation. The students' "group collaboration and role modelling allowed the participants to share their personal experiences, cultural knowledge, and experience with other cultures" (p. 123). Baurain enjoyed watching his American literature students form small learning communities within large classes at a Vietnamese university (2007). He noted that the element of cooperative learning was particularly strong. Students were challenged "to take responsibility for their own learning" (p. 243). In his active-learning classes, students "returned to texts again and again, raising points, discussing, uncovering more layers of meaning, and looking again" (pp. 241-242). Iskhak (2016) reported that Indonesian university students gained confidence and improved proficiency in small group discussions of the texts read in the class.

"For example, joy, laughter, and active engagement in classroom discussions were the unique features in the non-threatening classroom atmosphere. Freedom in expressing ideas was seen in the subjects' creative types of questioning and responding. For example, their ways of intertextualization of their own life perspectives or worldviews in oral responses stimulated the more challenging and interactive communication, which can enhance their L2 communicative competence" (p. 49).

Kim (2016) observed an adult ESL class taught at a private school in Canada.

"Reading and discussing literary texts were central to the teaching and learning practices of the class. A large proportion of class time was devoted to small group discussions." ... "During such discussions, students were encouraged to present their interpretations and responses, and refer to the text to support their claims" (p. 9).

While it is true that this instructor's experience

with LD has been varied- one class hated LD so much that students skipped class to avoid them and chose to fail the class rather than participate- overall, students have enjoyed them and benefitted from them. There is enough flexibility in the LD approach, and in ER as well, that these pedagogical tools can be altered to accommodate different levels and abilities of students.

The Current Study

Materials and method

During a 15-week semester, students read one graded reader every week in a class that met twice a week. The GR were from several different publishers and ranged between level one and level three. On the first class of the week, students chose the titles which appealed to them and were told that if they did not enjoy the book, to stop reading and bring it to the second class and exchange the GR for another title. Students rarely exchanged titles. For this semester, students kept track of the books they read in a reading journal. Shorter than a book report, The journal was just a record of the books each student read and their reactions to them.

For the LD, students read an assigned short story from Oxford Bookworms Club Stories for Reading Circles, Bronze level. The LD met every two weeks to discuss seven simplified stories;

The Horse of Death by Sait Faik

The Little Hunters at the Lake by Yalvac Ural

Mr. Harris and the Night Train by Jennifer Bassett

Sister Love by John Escott

Omega File 349: London, England by Jennifer Bassett

Tildy's Moment by O. Henry

Andrew, Jane, the Parson, and the Fox by Thomas Hardy

Students were assigned group roles according to the Bronze book; discussion leader, summarizer, connector, word master, passage person, and culture collector. Each group member filled out the worksheet from the Bronze book for their assigned role in English. Thirty minutes was scheduled in the second class of the week, every other week for the LD. The instructor did not lecture during this time. Instead, the instructor floated between groups observing, answering

specific questions about vocabulary, usage, or content, etc. Students were repeatedly told that their opinions were valid and that there was usually more than one “correct” answer. At the end of the semester, students were asked to write their opinions about the LD and turn them in on a voluntary basis. Twelve out of 25 students turned in written opinions.

Student comments

(edited for brevity and clarity)

Student 1:

“I think that a student has a role and having a debate were good. Unlike reading journal, since the talk was short, this was able to be read thoroughly.”

Student 2:

“Reading a book in English I was the first time, but it was good because I understand the contents of the book more than I thought. I thought was scary so much content, why this book would do or what was dark. I thought that I want to read even more bright story. But it was interesting.

It was interesting to hear the opinion of everyone in the discussion of the group, because there was also a different way of thinking than my own.”

Student 3:

“To discuss the story of one group was fun. I thought that it was good to be able to better understand the contents of the story. I thought the number of one group, and say even about 4-5 people. That way is because we can talk deeply.

I think the place teaching material is not too difficult it was good. Those things that can be read without much dictionary will appear motivated. However, the contents of the story was dark. I think because people die in any story, the story with a happy ending readable fun is good.”

Student 4:

“That person died in all of the story, there is impressive dark story was often take place. However, it was very impressed you are reading the story that you thought-provoking

that amount at most. I was left to mind the most is the story of the night train. It is a story that horrible events such as those seen in a dream takes place in the night train. However, it was the work of ghosts. I was very shocked to this deployment. To bandy your impressions with discussion and everyone reading these stories it was very pleasant.”

Student 5:

“A person and a creature were dead every time, and the contents of a general story were scary.

I wanted to read a story of the happy ending a little more.

As for the discussion, it was good opinion of the friend who was different from oneself and that I could take a point of view into account.

But I was sometimes troubled because a role was assigned individually when that person was absent.

In addition, a discussion leader did not move, and the same person often pushed it forward every time. (*I think the student is complaining about students who were too shy to lead the discussion so someone else had to be the de facto leader.*)

Because I think it to be effective at an opportunity to argue about the same agenda while exchanging opinions with each other, I want you to continue it in the fall semester.”

Student 6:

“Throughout this book, by the discussions sprinkled with English and could confirm the content with the group, how the other students and I felt, I was able to learn very good English. I think I was able to work more seriously by being entrusted with the role to oneself.

Student 7:

“The contents of the book was sad. It became very dark feeling I am reading. However, we were able to obtain a lot of knowledge by reading this book.

Also, I think it is the exchange of opinions actively with friends, understanding has deepened more. I think the back page (*authors' biographies*) also helped to understand the contents.”

Student 8:

“It was a story heavier than I thought. Without a lot of difficult words, I was easy to read. It was so much fun classes brainstorm with everyone.”

Student 9:

“I think that the Reading Circles is good. Because I never had a chance to read a book written in English. Also, I felt speed Read English became a little faster.”

Student 10:

“There were many heavy stories on the whole. But since the sentence was short, it was readable, and I enjoyed myself each time and I was able to read. And communicating with everybody, since the lesson was completed, it was good.”

Student 11:

“I did not like so much the overall story of the reading circle, but I had so much fun in a group discussion. Understanding of the story deepened by discussion, interpretation of each person was different, it was interesting to hear the various opinions. It was quite serious when I was the discussion leader, but it became a good experience that everyone helped me. I think that it was easy to read and split the book. Within the stories of the reading circle book, I especially did not like “The Little Hunters at the Lake”, and the other stories were scary because a person was killed or is dying. I think about the Bronze stories, and want to do thought-provoking and a bit more complex from now on, but I also want to do a little more fun story. The Bronze book, since the sad little feeling after reading all the stories, I want to read even talk about bright happy end, if possible.”

Student 12:

“Deciding the reading circle parts ourselves, it was such fun voluntarily (*conducting the discussions themselves*). Writing the English synopsis of story ourselves is good, but it was good if I have a chance for me to look to my

English teacher if it is right. Eerie story is sad, I wanted to read more bright stories, if possible.”

Discussion

Reading the students' comments about the LD, and the ER as well, it is clear to see that the students enjoyed the interactions and felt that they learned from both the discussions and the reading. It is true, they found the LD short stories too dark. But they read them, and discussed them, using English, and even learned from them. Also, it is true that only 12 out of 25 students turned in comments. But the other students who did not comment also participated in the activities and appeared to have a good time doing so. No one complained about participating in the LD. And the class as a whole requested the next book in the series, Silver, for the next semester, which we used.

One of the things that this instructor has noticed in teaching these classes has been that students are frequently anxious about reading and communicating in English. By the time the students have reached this class, they have studied English for six years. Yet many students feel completely unprepared for and anxious about English class. They come into the class with some vocabulary words and disjointed grammar that they were forced to memorize for examinations, but no idea how to communicate with each other, the teacher or any books they may encounter. Huang et al. (2012) observed that students who generate output learn more vocabulary than those who just read the words. And “learners can benefit from engaging in a task with a higher level of involvement”, (p. 553), perhaps output tasks such as observed in LD. Schmitt et al. (2011) state, “[t]he more one engages with a topic, the more likely it is that vocabulary related to that topic will be learned,” (p. 38). Interestingly, they found that readers with high vocabulary knowledge, 98% -100%, did not exhibit 100% comprehension on reading tasks, calling into question emphasis on vocabulary study without appropriate context. Zhao et al. (2013) found that American students of Chinese experienced FL reading anxiety due to the unfamiliar writing system. Saito et al. (1999) found the same thing

with English-speaking students of Japanese. But they also found increased levels of FL reading anxiety in higher level courses. So it makes sense to look at Japanese students who enter university never having read a book in English, and expect to find similar levels of reading anxiety. Which is where the ER and the LD come in. ER lowers levels of reading anxiety, it encourages students to take steps to become more responsible for their own learning. The LD create class cohesion and encourage students to form their own learning communities. And LD promote different modes of reading, whether aesthetic for being aware of emotional content and the reader's emotional reaction, or efferent, for specific content and meaning, ((Forouzani, 2017; Kim, 2016).

Finally, it is important to remember that universities exist to teach students *How* to think. A professor of psychology at a large state school in the U. S. told his class, “[w]hatever information or theories you learn in this class, in 10 years, will be disproven or just plain wrong. The important thing is to learn how to think, how to ask questions.” It is fine to teach languages, and other content as well, but institutions of higher learning offer something else: we can offer students the opportunity to change the way they learn, the way they experience life, even the way they think. LD encourage students to not just learn about a text, but to learn about themselves as well, and to value the experiences and perspectives they bring with them to their classes. Pearson (2007) notes that in the rush to modernize and standardize education, many schools have eliminated student autonomy, teacher prerogative, and the flexibility to take a student's individual differences into account. Sarroub and Pernichek (2014) observe that “[t]he testing and accountability climate has caused some in the literacy community to enter into a compromising, narrowing of curriculum,” that does not benefit all students, even though all students are meant to benefit from standardization and accountability practices, (p. 25). Students' literacies are not being recognized or valued. Accountability and standardization practices threaten to strip context and individual engagement from the information students are expected to master. Treating students as devices to be programmed and the information they must take in as apps

which will reprogram and update those devices is not effective practice. Nor do students seem to be enjoying such a pedagogical approach. If the students are not enjoying the educational experience, why are they here?

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