

A short comparative study on how students fared when dealing with native level readings under differing circumstances

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Abstract

This paper compares two methods used to try to motivate students to read and improve upon their reading skills. Although the use of graded readers is now a topic of much discussion, with many advocating the benefits, this author believes that the choice of many graded readers used leaves little to be desired and teachers have little input in classes in which they are utilised. This paper will argue that while graded readers have a place in the EFL / EAP classroom, it is more beneficial to engage students with materials more pertinent to the particular major they are studying and which helps them comprehend the subject matter.

Keywords: graded readers, teacher and student efficacy, flipped classroom, student interaction.

Introduction

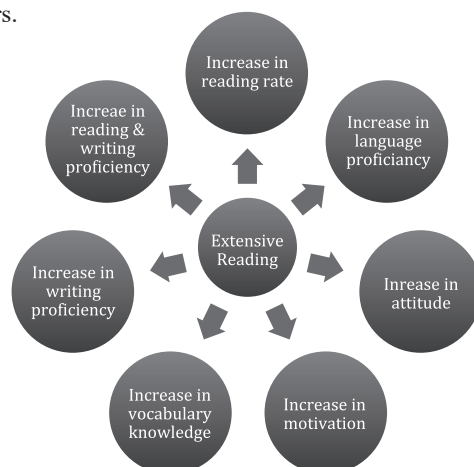
Much has been written on how students cope with different reading materials. Various theories include bottom-up, top-down and interactive approaches, and a number of models highlight these theories. Without doubt, there are differences in the ways L1 and L2 readers cope with the dearth of reading matter available. It has been suggested that we first learn to read before we read to learn and this process of learning to read is more difficult for L2 readers. Recently a number of software assessment programs such as M Reader and X Reading have become popular tools in a number of universities in Japan. Indeed, I work at one institute in which we make use of graded readers and assessment software to help assess students' reading speeds and comprehension skills. Although much more work is needed in this area, my personal feeling is that the majority of graded materials used are basic, uninteresting and fail to capture students attention. I base this view on student feedback, my own personal experience of reading the materials and, most importantly, my eight year-old daughters' feedback. If the reading matter fails to capture the imagination of a child, how can it possibly motivate university students? Furthermore, the use of illustrations in reading material for teens surely has a detrimental effect on their imaginative and creative skills, as they are restricted from formulating their own images by referring to the words alone. Additionally, when students read in class, teacher time is wasted, as they do not wish to interfere with student concentration by breaking the silence. Instead of using graded readers I felt that students would fare better when presented with higher-level materials and asked to answer questions related to comprehension and subtle inference rather than on basic questions, the answers to which could be easily found in the text.

This paper investigates the outcomes on four university classes of approximately 36 students' test scores when presented with higher lever readings under test conditions and asked to interpret meaning and reply to questions using their own words instead of simply searching through the text for answers to 'Wh' questions and rehashing sentences presented in the text.

Problem

Recent advances in IT have led to an emphasis on assessment and performance based instruction and many teachers I know have complained that their role in the classroom has changed considerably due to this. These views have been expressed during teacher meetings and in private conversations. Instead of teaching, they feel they have become facilitators and merely record student performance. I, too, sometimes feel this way and I have experience of being in situations where a particular university has decided to try the latest CALL innovation without first conducting a needs analysis to fully consider how useful it might be. This problem is of particular significance with relation to L2 reading classes. Students are asked to read and answer short quizzes in order to pass a course. I have sat with students who have difficulty in reading even simple sentences and therefore receive no benefit whatsoever from the classes, even though they read graded readers. Biesta (2016) discusses the negative effects brought about by the implementation of IT to continually assess and monitor students and asks all stakeholders to consider what the purpose of education is. Jang (2014) also discusses how assessment should promote positive learning but often does not. At times it seems that students are *only* being assessed and that teaching has become inconsequential due to this. As the students I teach at the university level have already received six years of junior and high school English education, I assume that they should be somewhat competent in reading, and in possession of a number of skills. To test their comprehension, I decided to test them with a higher-level exam than one they might be used to. I also wanted to discover whether, given time, they would be able to work at their own pace and come to enjoy reading, in other words, read to learn instead of learning to read. The following chart, adapted from Albay (2017) highlights the benefits to be gleaned from utilising extensive reading practices in EFL. However, as I hope to demonstrate, using authentic texts shows similar positive findings than using graded readers.

Chart 1: Diagram showing benefits of using graded readers.
Adapted from Albay (2017)



Albay mentions the fact that extensive reading can increase motivation and increase proficiency. However, I feel this is dependent on the types of readings and on how feedback is given. When teachers give students graded reader and leave them to their own devices it is difficult for students to perceive improvement and therefore increase motivation. Additionally, as teachers, when we provide students with interesting readings and check their answers, we have greater insight into their thought processes; a benefit that assessment software cannot match. According to Bryson (1990) most native speakers acquire a vocabulary of between 40,000 to 50,000 words. University students should have an adequate working vocabulary to accommodate everyday issues. Nation (2001) has demonstrated a large overlap across word frequency lists, which means that around 2000 words account for at least 80% of words in fiction, newspapers and academic texts.

I therefore feel that at the university level, we should be showing students how to improve their vocabulary knowledge and to become more aware of the multitude of meanings that one word may have. Additionally, as Hudson (2011. P136) explains a major goal of reading instruction is to help learners to become strategic readers. Six strategies that have been found to consistently affect comprehension according to (Brown and Palinscar, 1989) are:

1. Clarification of reading purpose in order to determine appropriate strategy
2. Activation of relevant background knowledge and linkage to text
3. Allocation of attention to important information in text
4. Evaluation of content for consistency and compatibility with prior knowledge
5. Self monitoring and regulation of comprehension
6. Testing of inferences regarding text message.

When students read graded readers with pictures of teddy bears and small children going to elementary school in the US for example, there is little clarification of purpose, no background knowledge, next no important information; in other words, none of the above six points are addressed. I therefore believe that even low-level students should be given reading texts that require interaction at some, even, basic level. Subsequently, I formulated the following research questions in order to discover whether my beliefs were justified .

Research Questions

1. Would students, given time, be able to work on a reading passage in order to understand it at a deeper level and successfully answer questions on the passage using their own words?
2. By becoming more aware of the deeper meaning of the passage, would they develop more autonomous reading skills to better interpret future reading tasks?
3. Is there a way to combine graded readers with more authentic passages instead of being committed to one and thus achieve teacher and student efficacy?

Procedure

A reading test was administered to two classes of (N = 36 & N = 37 in July of 2018 (group 1) and again to two different classes of (N = 33 & N = 35) from the same university, and studying the same course in January of 2019 (group 2). However, students in the first group were given no instruction on how to answer the questions and they received the reading passage on the designated day and time of the test. The students in the second group received a mock test the week prior to the winter vacation and were instructed on how to answer the questions. Additionally, they were given the reading passage for the final test in the final class before the winter break and informed that they had to read the passage carefully and try to comprehend it fully. They knew to bring the passage, without anything written on it, on the day of the test in January and that they would receive the questions on the passage at that time. They were to be given the same amount of time, one hour, as group one had in July to complete the test. It was my intention to discover by how many percentage points they would improve upon the first group. The tests were from an old Scottish certificate of education interpretation test aimed at sixteen year-old native readers, so it was somewhat higher level than what the Japanese students were used to. However, I believe that by raising the bar, students should be able to achieve higher grades and be more able to interact with the text. Gabe (2009) emphasises the following points to encourage students to become more proficient at reading in a second language:

1. Don't make tasks too difficult.
2. Let students have enough time.
3. Set clear goals.
4. Provide feedback.
5. Make the task / reading interesting.
6. Allow students to have control.
7. Increase intrinsic motivation.
8. Increase complexity of task over time.

Although the first point, 'Don't make tasks too difficult' might be construed as an issue in this instance, I felt that by giving students time over the winter break to become familiar with the passage, the final task was not overly difficult for them. It also offered them the chance to become familiar with how reading passages are tested in native speaker countries.

Gabe (2009) also lists the following points on how to increase motivation:

1. Give opportunities for students to see advances.
2. Give opportunities for extended reading.
3. Provide interesting texts.
4. Allow for social collaboration.
5. Provide scaffolding and allow autonomy.
6. Provide regular evaluation and feedback.
7. Provide reading strategy instruction and show examples.

As students did the mock test prior to receiving the final passage, they did receive reading strategy and

instruction. They were also able to see improvements on the final test scores and become more autonomous readers. Additionally, when told upon completion of the test that it was a native level test for sixteen-year old students, they were highly pleased with the advances they had made.

The next section will focus on the results of the reading tests between the four classes.

Results

The first group consisted of two classes: (N = 36, and N = 37) and the second group of two classes had similar numbers (N = 33, and N = 35). The table below shows the scores achieved on the tests. These are also represented as percentages of the maximum points available - that being 36.

As can be seen, the majority of students in the first two classes received scores below five and between 6 and 10. The mean scores of all classes were as follows:

- ▶ C1 – 6.7
- ▶ C2 – 7.3
- ▶ C3 – 10.4
- ▶ C4 – 10.7

A significant number of students in the final two classes fared much better on the test. This improvement was manifest in areas such as sentence construction, word choice/usage and grammar. Indeed, students

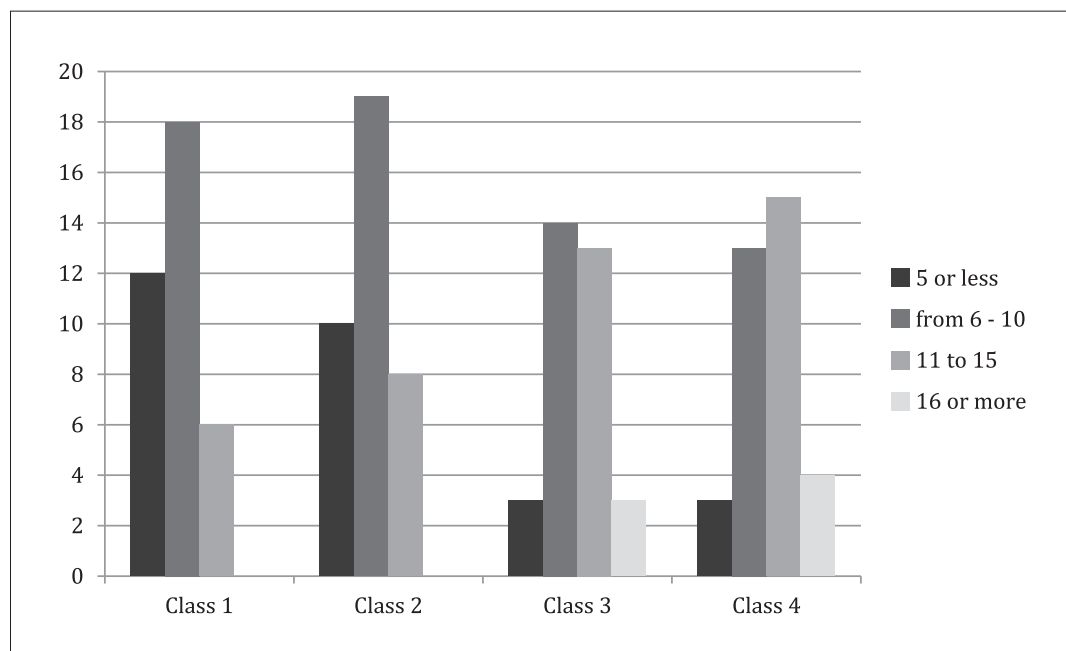


Chart 2: Results and average scores on the final reading tests.

showed heightened awareness of task requirement and fulfilment and exhibited enhanced interaction with the text. The mean scores between the first and second and third and fourth classes also improved slightly. Perhaps this was due to some bias on the part of the teacher and I may have unwittingly altered the lesson slightly. Although this test is rather ad hoc, it suggests that further work is needed. If we refer again to the criteria mentioned by Gabe (2009) we can see that by engaging students with thoughtful texts and by having faith in their ability we can achieve successful end results.

Discussion

All too often students in Japan enter university with only basic reading and writing skills. The focus on junior high and high school English education seems to be on grammar and word stress; language elements with little significance in the real world. Perhaps this is the case because Japanese L2 language teachers find it easy to teach and grade. Additionally, it seems that in many instances when teachers use graded readers we act as assessors and have little interaction with students and, therefore, bear little relevance to their final performance. Additionally, this method of instruction, in my opinion, does a great injustice to students, as they easily become bored and lose motivation to study. Although it is somewhat difficult to prepare reading matter to suit the interests of all concerned, motivating students with a test upon completion helps stimulate them and enhance motivation to succeed. Hudson (2011) discusses the hierarchy of reading skills and university students should be able to identify with some of the higher end skills such as drawing inferences about meaning and content, recognizing a writer's purpose, attitude and tone and following the structure. The focus should be on developing these skills and not on correctly placing the accent on a word or finding a spelling error within the passage. Graded reader do have a place in the classroom, but I might suggest that they be used more in a tipped classroom environment whereby students focus on reading outside of class time and perhaps present their findings in class, or the teacher can provide more stimulating activities and help students with difficulties during class time.

Conclusion

Schwienhorst (2005) discusses how a learner who 'participates actively in the learning environment' and takes responsibility for their learning can become autonomous. I felt that affording students the opportunity to become acquainted with the text prior to the final exam would allow them time and freedom to discover the best way for them to do this. The results seem to indicate that the students were prepared and able to interact with the text at a more profound level.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, I do not think that providing 20 year olds with material intended for young children is an ideal way to motivate them to read more. Oh (2001) mentions that low-level learners might benefit from redundancy of content, but this is when reading difficult texts. However, I would personally be shocked to be expected to read storybooks with pictures of bears on the front cover if I were a university student. Of much more importance is the ability to be able to read and understand everyday topics. Additionally, the addition of imagery and omission of adjectives in these graded books has, in my view, a negative impact on the reader.

In order to have students interact more with the same material, I decided to write my own textbook. I have included a sample from the first chapter in the appendix. The aim of the text is to allow students to not only focus on any one particular reading passage and answer questions, but by utilising a flipped classroom method, students are asked to watch a *TEDED* video and answer some pre-prepared questions before coming to class. They are therefore familiar with the topic and some of the content before they begin reading. In class, they read the passage, check vocabulary and answer some discussion questions in order to become more familiar with the passage and topic. Upon completion of this phase, they are then assigned random groups and asked to compete in four *Quizlet* quizzes in order to reinforce comprehension. The quizzes are designed differently to accommodate translation, definition, comprehension and skimming and scanning techniques. In previous classes at this particular university, a number of students indicated that they would like more opportunities to interact with different students each week instead of the same groups. As *Quizlet* automatically arranges teams, students should be able to make other friends and have fun competing as groups. Finally, students are asked to do their own research on a similar topic to the reading and present their findings. By doing this, it is hoped that they will utilise the procedures learned in the initial parts of the lesson.

I hope to do further research on the outcome of this approach and to try to improve upon using graded readers at the institute in which I am required to do so. While I understand that a number of lower level students enter university in Japan with little reading ability, I remain convinced that presenting them with material deemed boring by an eight year old girl is not the way forward. Perhaps we could help students become more creative by having them write and edit their own short stories before sharing them with the class. By doing so we can have more immediacy with the students and provide them with a more rewarding experience.

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