

Teachers' Impact on Students' Extensive Reading Behavior

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In our experience, students usually do Extensive Reading independently, and more often than not outside the classroom. Given that, do we teachers have an impact on our students' understanding of Extensive Reading, and how they actually read? In this paper, we present two case studies to illustrate that in fact we do, and very profoundly. The implication is that we as teachers must carefully consider how we present Extensive Reading to students, and how we guide them through their initial Extensive Reading experiences. This is to help our students develop a deeper understanding of what Extensive Reading is, and why it is effective – and in doing so, motivate our students to read more.

The two case studies we present are both set in Japanese university English major programs. Robert's case study looked at how three teachers in a Japanese university first-year reading program presented Extensive Reading to their students over one semester of classes. It was discovered that these three teachers presented Extensive Reading to students in very different ways. As a result, each teacher's students developed very different understandings of Extensive Reading and, more significantly, read different numbers of graded readers. Junko's case study involved second- and third-year university English majors. Constant encouragement from the teacher and guidance on reading easy and enjoyable material improved students' attitude, raising students' awareness of their reading speed and realistic reading time, which helped them manage their Extensive Reading. This positively affected the amount of reading students did. This remainder of this paper presents the findings of each case study.

Robert's Case Study

Research Method

The student participants were freshman English majors in a private Japanese university, taking a weekly ninety-minute reading class in the first fourteen-week semester of their first year. Ninety students were streamed into six classes, each with about fifteen students, based upon the results of a written placement test. The teachers were native speakers of English from Australia, England and the United States, all experienced reading teachers and

familiar with Extensive Reading, having taught this class for between four and ten years. Each teacher taught two classes of students.

The first-year reading program itself consisted of three elements: vocabulary development, intensive reading, and Extensive Reading. Each teacher was free to introduce Extensive Reading as they wanted to, and to do any activities they felt were suitable. The only requirement was that students were expected to read at least one book per week outside class. A large collection of graded readers was kept in the university library, and students were expected to independently go and borrow books from there. For these English majors, Extensive Reading began in the spring semester of their first year and continued over three years, so this first semester provided a crucial introduction to their Extensive Reading experiences at university.

The purpose of this case study was to see how these three experienced teachers presented Extensive Reading to their students, and to explore what impact each teacher had on their students' understanding of Extensive Reading, and how they actually read. Data were collected from both teachers and students. Each week, I recorded teachers' classroom explanations of Extensive Reading, took photographs of whiteboard explanations, collected class handouts, and briefly interviewed teachers after class to find out what they had done that day. At the end of the semester, students completed a short three-item, open-ended survey, and their Extensive Reading record sheets were photocopied to help calculate how many graded

readers each student had read.

Main Findings

These three teachers presented Extensive Reading to their students very differently. For example, one teacher, who taught the highest level classes, gave only a very short, almost perfunctory, spoken explanation in the first class about what Extensive Reading was, then almost immediately started students reading their first graded reader. There was little follow-up explanation in subsequent classes, and no discussion at all about Extensive Reading. Moreover, Extensive Reading was introduced as being "a required part of the course," with little further exploration of how Extensive Reading could develop students' lexical and grammatical development or increase reading speed.

By contrast, another teacher, who taught the lowest level classes, gave an enthusiastic spoken explanation in almost every class, illustrated with stories of previous students who had been successful readers. This teacher framed Extensive Reading as "a great way for you to learn English – and enjoy doing so." This teacher also used written explanations, some translated into Japanese, and students were given opportunities to discuss Extensive Reading. The difference between these two teachers in terms of the detail, depth, length, and passion with which Extensive Reading was introduced was remarkable. The third teacher also introduced Extensive Reading enthusiastically.

Did these differences affect students' understanding of Extensive Reading? In short, yes. Based upon their survey answers, students in the highest level classes, in which the teacher had given very little explanation, had only developed a limited understanding of what Extensive Reading was. For example, in answer to the question, "What is Extensive Reading?" most students wrote "I can't really remember." Nor could these students really answer the question, "Why do Extensive Reading?" Most students wrote relatively general comments, such as "to help our reading skills improve," "to continue reading at a constant pace," or "because we should learn to understand all information that is written in English." Finally, in response to the question, "How does Extensive Reading help your English?" students wrote rather superficial comments such as "I learned some new words, and I also learned how to use them" and "we will be able to understand written English

easily."

On the other hand, students in the lowest level classes, where the teacher had given repeated and detailed explanations, not surprisingly illustrated a much deeper and substantial understanding of Extensive Reading in their survey answers. "Reading lots and lots of very simple but very long texts." "Extensive Reading means reading for fun. It helps students develop reading speed, and to learn a lot of grammar." "Extensive Reading helps you learn grammar indirectly. When I read a book, I notice other meanings of words." "I read sentences quickly, so I don't use a dictionary. If I have unknown words, I imagine these meanings." On every question, these students from the lowest level classes wrote longer and more thoughtful answers than the students from the highest level classes taught by the other teacher, as did students in the middle classes taught by the third teacher.

Were there differences in students' Extensive Reading behavior? Students in the top level class, with a relatively indifferent teacher, read on average one book per week, whereas students in the bottom and middle level classes, with much more enthusiastic teachers, read an average of two books per week – that is, twice as many. The fact that the relatively indifferent teacher was, in fact, me has been a very salutary lesson indeed.

Junko's Case Study

Research Method

The participants were second- and third-year Extensive Reading class students who were English majors in a different private Japanese university. Their Extensive Reading program started in the first year and continued for three years. Students were streamed into four levels (A, B, C, D) based upon TOEIC test results and class grades. The students involved in this study were 2D class students (N=22, TOEIC average below 350) and 3A class students (N=41, TOEIC average around 550). These students had had different teachers before, and brought quite different understanding of Extensive Reading to this year's class.

Students were expected to borrow books from the university library, where there was a large collection of graded readers, leveled readers and picture books. Students were supposed to read the books primarily

outside of class, but some teachers had sustained silent reading time during class, so those students also had chances to read in class. Each teacher was free to introduce Extensive Reading as they liked to, and to do any activities they wished. Teachers were also free to set their own goals in terms of the amount of reading by their students.

The purpose of this case study was to see how a teacher's constant, eager explanation and encouragement of Extensive Reading would promote students' reading. Data was collected from three sources: book reports submitted by students every week, which included the number of pages and number of words for each book; class observation; and open-ended questionnaire at the beginning and end of the semester, including students writing their definitions of Extensive Reading. At the end of the semester, each student also had to submit their book report record sheet, where they had listed all the book titles, levels, total number of pages and words they had read.

Main Findings

At the beginning of the semester, class 2D students had little idea what Extensive Reading was. Only seven students out of twenty mentioned it was "reading," five referring to "many," "easy" or "enjoyable." Four students could not answer what Extensive Reading was, and two answered it was "reading and translating." By contrast, class 3A students had a stronger understanding of Extensive Reading, but many were not enjoying reading. Most of them said Extensive Reading was "reading a lot," and quite a few said "reading quickly." Only one student mentioned "easy" and another "enjoyable."

For both classes, written and oral explanations of Extensive Reading were given in the first two weeks. Emphasis was put on selecting easy and enjoyable books and reading in quantity, but also the pedagogical reasons behind Extensive Reading were explored. Guidance and explanations were repeated in the following weeks. However, with class 2D students especially, despite the teacher's enthusiasm, only a few students were reading a significant amount, and many were not seriously involved in reading at all. Many class 2D students were reluctant to go to the library to borrow books in the first place. Quite a few were late for class. Some were very sleepy in the classroom. Even in class 3A class, the gap between good readers

and reluctant readers was huge.

For class 2D, the teacher had to bring a lot of easy and enjoyable books into class for students to choose from, to attract students to read. They needed the "lure" to "get hooked" (Day and Bamford, 1998). Penguin Readers Easystarts, Foundation Reading Library, leveled books, and attractive picture books were brought to class every week. Students gradually started to get involved. The same kinds of books, but including higher levels, were also brought to class 3A lessons to promote enjoyable reading. Class 3A students also started enjoying those books during the sustained silent reading time, which was about thirty minutes each class.

The teacher also read many graded readers and picture books herself so that she could recommend good ones to the students, making them to want to read them. She needed to be a guide and a role model, showing that she was really enjoying reading. She wrote in the same book report recording sheet as the students used. Also, around the middle of the term, students' actual reading time outside class on Extensive Readings was calculated based on their realistic words per minute (wpm), which is around 100. When the teacher showed this figure to the students, many of them became embarrassed because it revealed that some of them were reading only a few minutes per day. Based upon their reading speed, students could know how many words they would be able to read by the end of the term, which helped them plan and manage their Extensive Reading realistically.

With these strategies, and with continual explanation by the teacher of the positive effects of Extensive Reading, mostly in an oral form and sometimes written, students in both classes started reading more in the latter half of the semester. Class 3A students were reading an average of 4,484 words per week in the first six weeks, but their average over the 15-week semester rose to 8,711 words. Class 2D students were reading an average of only 1,889 words per week in the first six weeks, but their average of 15 weeks increased to 2,983 words by the end of the semester.

By the end of the semester, students in both classes had developed deeper understandings of Extensive Reading, and started to enjoy reading more. When asked to define Extensive Reading in their final questionnaire at the end of the semester, nineteen

students in class 3A used the word "enjoyable" or "enjoy." Some of the students' definitions were: "Extensive Reading is encountering many books and finding what I like" (class 2D student). "*Enjoying* leads to *reading in quantity*, that leads to *power (improvement)*" (class 2D student—emphasis in the original). "It is a method in which you learn the language unconsciously" (class 3A student). "Extensive Reading is continuously reading easy and enjoyable books, targeting on your favorite genre, so your English will improve" (class 3A student).

Also, the final questionnaire showed that most students in both classes felt they would be able to read more in the second semester because now they enjoyed reading and knew how to do Extensive Reading better. One of the questions was: "Will you read more in the second semester?" To this, 90% of students answered either "strongly yes" or "yes" in both classes – which illustrates the impact a determined teacher can have in the Extensive Reading classroom.

Discussion

Our students certainly do listen to what we say in our Extensive Reading classes. They also observe us as role models, feeling our passion and sharing the joy of reading. Sometimes we might need to encourage them, or use strategies to raise their awareness of Extensive Reading. Clearly, how we present Extensive Reading does affect students' understanding of what Extensive Reading is and why to do it – which in turn affects the amount of Extensive Reading that each student does.

References

Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.