

Attitudes Toward Extensive Reading Throughout a Semester at Soka University



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The purpose of this research was to examine students' attitudes towards extensive reading throughout a semester at Soka University. The participants were economics majors, taking an elective course called Academic Foundations for Academic Majors during Spring 2011. Thirty-three intermediate level students in one class and 21 advanced students were given a questionnaire to answer at the beginning, middle and the end of the semester. Differences in the attitudes of students in these classes were compared and attitudinal change over the course was examined. The results of the study indicate that many students in both classes, at the start of the course, tend to dislike reading in English because of its difficulty. However, by the end of the semester, while many intermediate students tend to continue to perceive extensive reading as a task they dislike because it is difficult, all of the advanced learners indicated that they like reading.

Prior to discussing Soka University students' attitudes toward extensive reading throughout a semester at intermediate and advanced levels, it is worth discussing previous research findings related to differences in perceptions toward extensive reading for advanced level learners and lower level learners. Advanced level learners tend to perceive it as a pleasant and imaginative activity (Elley, 1992). They also tend to perceive it as a way to learn things (Bondy, 1990). In contrast, lower level learners perceive extensive reading as school work (Bondy, 1990). Moreover, they feel that it is a serious and a difficult process that requires hard work and disciplined effort (Elley, 1992). The inevitable questions that arise out of these are the following. Do students taking the intermediate level Academic Foundations for Economic Majors (AFEM) course fit into the category of lower level learners, as the aforementioned researchers claim? Also, do students taking the advanced level AFEM course truly fit into the category of advanced level learners?

The Level of the Students in the Intermediate and Advanced AFEM Courses

Prior to enrolling into AFEM courses, students are required to take the TOEFL ITP as a placement test. The score range on the TOEFL ITP for intermediate students for the placement test was 423 to 457, which is equivalent to approximately 32 to 46 on the TOEFL iBT test; and the score ranges for the advanced level was 460 to 517, equivalent to approximately 46 to 68 on the

TOEFL iBT. In order to be admitted into undergraduate programs in English medium universities abroad, the minimum requirement typically tends to be above 80 out of 120 on the TOEFL iBT. For graduate programs, the typical minimum requirement tends to be above 100. Therefore, it can be concluded that based on the conversion from TOEFL ITP to TOEFL iBT, students at an intermediate level need to double their scores while students at advanced level are slightly ahead in terms of attaining a high enough score to become eligible for being admitted into undergraduate programs abroad. Out of 32 intermediate students, 7 students were able to score over 480 points on the TOEFL ITP administered at the end of the semester, enabling them to move up to the advanced level for next semester .

The Contents of the Questionnaires at the Beginning, Middle and the End of the Semester

The following were the contents of the questionnaires that were distributed to the students at the beginning, middle and end of the semester. Each question, first written in English, was followed by a Japanese translation to ensure that every student understood what was being asked.

The First Questionnaire: Distributed in May 2011

Questions in the first questionnaire included: (1) Do you like reading in your L1? (2) How much time do you spend on reading in your L1? (3) Why do you like or dislike reading in your L1? (4) Do you like

reading in your L2? (5) How much time do you spend on reading in your L2? (6) Why do you like/dislike reading in your L2? (7) Are you looking forward to extensive reading in this course? (8) What do you think will be the outcome of reading 10 pages every day in English throughout this semester? (9) Why do you think it will turn out as mentioned in question 8? (10) Do you feel good about the hypothesis you have set in question 8? Why or why not?

The Second Questionnaire: Distributed in June 2011

Questions one through six were the same as the first questionnaire. (7) Do you like extensive reading in this course so far? Why or why not? (8) In what way do you think extensive reading has helped you with learning your L2? (9) You are half way there. What do you think will be the outcome of reading 10 pages every day in English throughout this semester now? (10) Why do you think it will turn out as mentioned in question 9? (11) Do you feel good about the hypothesis you have set in question 9?

The Final Questionnaire: Distributed at the End of the Semester in July 2011

Questions 1-6 were the same as the first and the second questionnaires. (7) Did you like extensive

reading in this course? Why or why not? (8) In what way do you think extensive reading has helped you with learning your L2? (9) Do you feel good about the effect of extensive reading on your English ability? (10) Would you like to continue extensive reading? Why or why not? (11) Do you think continuing extensive reading will help you develop your English ability in the future? Why or why not?

Results and Discussion

There were two major findings based on the questionnaires that are worth mentioning. First, the results of the questionnaires indicate that many students in both the intermediate and advanced classes, at the start of the course, tended to dislike reading in English because they felt it was difficult for them. Second, however, by the end of the semester, based on the data from students that answered the final questionnaire, while many intermediate students tended to continue to perceive extensive reading as a task they don't like because it is difficult, all of the advanced learners indicated that they like reading, which may be attributed to their high English proficiency. Two tables will be shown, explained and analyzed below, to explicate these findings.

Table 1. Intermediate and Advanced Level Students' Perceptions at the Beginning of the Semester

	Intermediate	Advanced
Why like reading in L2	Like English (5/13 students) Can feel growth (3/13) Fun/Interesting (2/13) Sensible/Cool (2/13) Good for me (1/13)	Can learn (7/12) Fun/Interesting (4/12) No reason (1/12)
Why dislike reading in L2	Difficult (8/17) Lack of vocabulary (5/17) No reason (2/17) Words are too small (1/17) Disinterested (1/17)	Difficult (3/6) Time consuming (2/6) No habit (1/6)

Explanation of Table 1

The top reason for students disliking reading in L2 for both levels was the fact that reading is perceived as a difficult activity.

Analysis of Table 1

Interestingly, both the intermediate and advanced students tended to perceive extensive reading as a pleasant and imaginative activity (Elley, 1992) and as a way to learn things (Bondy, 1990). Elley and Bondy, on the other hand, state that these feelings are

experienced by advanced learners and not lower level learners. Thus, according to their characterizations, some students in the intermediate course may be categorized as advanced learners. At the same time, some advanced students may be categorized into lower level learners since the argument made by Elley (1992) is that lower level learners tend to perceive extensive reading as a serious, difficult task that requires discipline and hard work.

Table 2. Intermediate and Advanced Level Students' Perceptions at the End of the Semester

	Intermediate	Advanced
Why like reading in L2	Interesting/exciting (5/21) Can feel improvement (4/21) Want to get English skills (3/21) Learn vocabulary (2/21) Contents became easier to understand (2/21) Can feel confident that I can read (1/21) Can have fun and learn (1/21) Could read more quickly (1/21) Learn culture (1/21) Can understand articles in English (1/21)	Easy to read (1/9) Helps improve English skills Fun to say English words aloud Learn new words Helps with logical thinking Could acquire new knowledge Can find L1 expressions I like in L2 Some books are more difficult than others (*all data in this box are individual comments)
Why dislike reading in L2	Difficult (6/9) Tiring (2/9) Time consuming (1/9)	

Explanation of Table 2

Based on those who answered the survey, the top reason students didn't like extensive reading in the intermediate class was again the fact that it was difficult. In contrast, the advanced learners that answered the survey all stated that they like reading in English.

Analysis of Table 2

In the intermediate class, 2 students stated that they like reading in L2 because the contents became easier to understand. These students may be shifting to what Bondy (1990) and Elley (1992) categorizes as advanced learners.

Conclusion

The Spring 2011 AFEM courses I taught at Soka University had as one of its objectives improving the TOEFL ITP (Institutional Testing Program) scores of students over the semester. Therefore, extensive reading for 10 pages a day on a topic of the individual students' choice was not the only assignment throughout the courses. Students in both levels also solved TOEFL ITP problems and had weekly quizzes on grammar and vocabulary. These combined with extensive reading may have contributed to the positive shifts in attitude toward extensive reading for many of the students at both the intermediate and the advanced levels.

References

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