

Beyond COVID-19: Online Extensive Reading and Face-to-Face Classes

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Abstract

With the sudden move to online classes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, much of Chubu University was forced to suddenly pivot from face-to-face to online learning methods. The Department of English Language and Culture was of course no different, and one of the biggest challenges the department faced in this way was its extensive reading curriculum. Before the pandemic, students came to the department's graded reader library and checked out physical books to read as an important part of first- and second-year students' general English coursework. With students unable to come to campus, the department had to quickly find and implement an online alternative. Fortunately, such an alternative was found, but it was difficult to determine the effect this change had on student engagement with the extensive reading assignment, or their learning outcomes as a result of taking part in it. In order to assess this new program, and to help make a decision about whether to continue an online program moving forward or to return to the traditional program that had been in use before, faculty of the Department of English Language and Culture conducted a study, focusing on student experiences with both the new online program and the traditional program. It was found that the move to an online program had no appreciable negative effect on student attitudes towards graded readers, or learning outcomes associated with its use, but that the online nature of the program had potential negative effects in terms of community building and cohesion.

Key words

English education, online learning, extensive reading

1 Introduction

Students majoring in English naturally want to improve their language skills. As educators, we need to find ways for students to achieve this goal. Of course we do what we can in the classroom, but the time we have with students there is limited. One way to help students improve their skills is to provide resources outside of the classroom for students to use to help them in their journey to language proficiency. In 2010, the Department of English Language and Culture implemented an

extensive reading program into its curriculum. This paper will provide the reasons for this implementation, a brief history of the program and changes that were made when the coronavirus pandemic hit and students were no longer on campus.

2 Reasons for Extensive Reading (ER)

Extensive reading is having students read extensively at or below their level. Students should be able to understand what they are reading

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without consulting a dictionary. Graded readers, books that are written to certain levels of English proficiency, are often used. Students choose the books they read and hopefully the students will forget what they are studying and enjoy reading the book whilst reaping the benefits.

The benefits of extensive reading have been well documented. Jeon and Day's (2016) meta-analysis of 49 studies suggests that students in an English as a Foreign Language Environment (EFL), as is the situation here at Chubu University, benefited more than students in an English as a Second Language environment (ESL). But what are these benefits?

One clear benefit is that students increase their vocabulary in the second language (L2). Iwata (2022) looked at 72 non-English majors and used the Mochizuki Vocabulary Size Test (MVST) to measure vocabulary knowledge. He found that the level of the students' vocabulary increased significantly. Liu and Zhang (2018) meta-analyzed the data of 21 studies and also found great benefits in terms of L2 vocabulary for students who had utilized ER. Several other studies have also found that L2 vocabulary increases (Hafiz & Tudor, 1990; Waring & Kano 2003).

The improvement of lexical knowledge is not the only benefit students can gain from ER. Reading proficiency also improves for students (Aka, 2019; Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012; Iwata, 2022; Jeon & Day, 2016; Robb & Kano, 2013). Furthermore, knowledge of grammar improves (Aka, 2018; Rezaee & Nourzadeh, 2011), helps with listening and speaking abilities (Cho & Krashen, 1994), writing in the L2 (Mermelstein, 2015), and helps with improved scores on the TOEIC (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukuda, 2010). The benefits are clear, but the implementation might not be clear.

3 The Department of English Language and Culture's Extensive Reading Program

Robb (2002) provides us with a realistic view of ER in Japan and how to implement it. Let us take a look at the history of the ER program in the Department of English Language and Culture.

3.1 Creation and Development of the ER Program

To have an ER program, books are needed. The department purchased several graded readers for students to use and these books are kept in the Multi-Media Room (MMR). At first, students could come and get books and return them to get another, but we had a problem with students not returning the books, so we implemented a borrowing system to ensure the books returned.

In the spring semester of 2010, students had a modest goal of 15,000 words to read by the end of the semester. For every 5,000 words over the goal they read, they were given a bonus of 1% points on their final grade, but if they did not meet the goal, their final grade was lowered 20% points. In the fall semester, this goal was raised to 30,000 words.

The following year the ER program became a bit more organized with first-year students having a goal of 50,000 words for the spring semester and 75,000 words for the fall semester. Students in their second year had a goal of 100,000 words for both semesters. The bonus system remained in place, but was changed to 10,000 words over the goal for a 1%-point increase in the final grade. Failure to reach these goals would result in their final grade being lowered by 25% points.

The ER program is connected to a variety of classes. For first-year students, these classes are English for Academic Purposes A and B, Communicative Grammar A and B, and Integrated English A and B. In the second year, these classes are English for Academic Purposes C and D and Integrated English C and D.

To track the students, a website called Moodle Reader, later changed to MReader, was used. This website is used to check to see if a student actually read and understood what they were reading by having students answer ten multiple-choice questions about the book. These questions are designed to be easily answered if the book was actually read.

One problem with our system was that many students would wait until the end of the semester to read the required number of words. This will not help students as much as constantly reading, so we implemented a midterm goal that was half of the total. If students failed to reach the midterm goal,

their final grade would be lowered by 10% points. We kept the penalty for not reaching the final goal at 25% points, but students would not be penalized twice. This somewhat solved our problem, but then we noticed many students were only reading right before the midterm goal and final goal. We then implemented weekly goals for the English for Academic Purposes classes. This seemed to help.

3.2 The ER Program and COVID-19

With the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, the department had to quickly pivot to purely-online classes, with little time to develop a thoughtfully-integrated online extensive reading element of the curriculum. Fortunately, we were able to find an entirely-online graded reader program in XReading, primarily because it was at the time the only such program that offered an entirely-online extensive reading program. XReading does allow for a hybrid delivery system with both online and in-person elements, but fortunately also had the tools in place to deliver a fully-fledged extensive reading program 100% remotely.

Through XReading, students can take a placement test, check out and read books of an appropriate level, and take comprehension quizzes all within the same website; this was very attractive for our remote delivery system in Spring semester 2020. The website also allows faculty to set reading targets for their classes, which fits nicely with the Department of English Language and Culture's extensive reading program.

For the return to hybrid remote and face-to-face classes in Fall semester 2020, we elected to stay with XReading, partly because of the uncertainty surrounding the possibility of again returning to remote teaching in the face of surges in COVID-19 cases, and partly for simplicity's sake; staying with a single program throughout the year would save us trouble in student and part-time instructor training.

Finally, as we looked at returning to fully on-campus classes in the future, the administrators of the extensive reading program decided to continue using XReading in the 2021 school year, while conducting a rigorous study of attitudes and learning outcomes to help us decide whether to return to the face-to-face physical books program

of MReader, the fully-online program available through XReading, or some hybrid of physical and online graded readers. This paper presents the preliminary results of that study, and will further describe our decisions vis a vis traditional vs. online extensive reading programs in a post-COVID-19 future.

4 The Study

The study was two-pronged, consisting of a survey given to students in the Department of English Language and Culture following their experiences with the online graded reader system, and interviews with full-time and part-time faculty members about their experiences with it.

The survey was given to 96 students in the department. About half of the participating students were first-year students (whose only experience with graded reading was through the online system) and half were second-year students (who had used the face-to-face system during their first year and the online system their second). It was delivered via Google Forms in Japanese, and participation was entirely voluntary. The survey asked a number of questions concerning students' experiences with extensive reading in general with respect to motivation, interest, engagement, and perceived effects on English level and reading ability.

It might be noted that it is difficult to find a direct correlation between students' academic achievement or measurable test scores and their participation in the graded reader program, as thanks to the connection to their grades participation and completion levels are very high, and few students go far beyond their goals.

Interviews with faculty were conducted informally and focused on discussions of ease of use of the online system, especially as compared with the face-to-face system, as well as perceptions of student engagement and usage.

5 Results

This section will discuss the results of the survey and interviews, split into student experiences and faculty experiences with the two systems.

5.1 Student Experiences

This section will begin with a discussion of students' experiences with graded reading in general. In the past, informal discussions with students have suggested that students do not particularly enjoy the graded reader assignments, but do perceive that the assignments are helpful for their English studies; the surveys supported these conclusions.

Notably, there was not a significant difference between first-year students (who had only used the online graded reader system) and second-year students (who had used both) for most of the survey results; experience with the original physical book graded reader system did not seem to change students' opinions about the ebook system.

When asked directly how they felt about reading graded readers, only 15.4% of respondents stated that they "very much liked" or "liked" reading graded readers, while 41.7% responded that they "neither liked nor disliked" them, and the remaining 42.9% of students reported that they "disliked" or "hated" doing the assignments. In a similar vein, 26% of the students reported that they agreed with the statement that they "could forget that they were studying" when reading the graded readers, while 52.1% disagreed. with the remaining students offering no opinion.

However, students generally felt that doing the graded reader assignments had positive outcomes for their English skills and other learning goals. When asked about general English skills, 69.8% of respondents agreed that Graded readers helped them improve, while only 8.3% disagreed, with 21.9% feeling neutral on the topic. Similarly, 57.3% of the students felt that their reading speed had improved dramatically since beginning graded readers, and 40.6% felt that their vocabulary had dramatically improved, and 56.2% felt that reading graded readers had a positive effect on their TOEIC scores.

Generally, students did not express a strong preference for one system or the other: 30.2% stated a preference for physical books to ebooks, while 41.6% stated the opposite and 28.2% stated no preference. Individual students had preferences, but taken as a whole there was little difference. Switching to ebooks also had little effect on students' success rates: completion rates remained

stable at roughly 90% before and through the pandemic with the change to the virtual system.

5.2 Faculty Experiences

Discussions with faculty about the change in system had two notable recurring themes: Ease of use on the one hand, and community-building on the other.

The general faculty consensus was that the online tools offered by the XReading program made administering the program considerably easier, thanks to all resources being consolidated in one place. Tracking student progress was also quite straightforward, and removing the burden of maintaining a physical library of books and tracking which students had borrowed books was also noted as a considerable step forward compared to the old program.

The largest drawback of the program, however, was more difficult to measure directly, but still quite important. Under the previous program, students had to come to the Department of English Language and Culture's Multimedia Room (MMR) in order to check out physical books, and interacted not only with each other, but with their upperclassmen in the MMR and working as staff there. It was quite common for first- and second-year students to ask the older students for recommendations of books to read, or advice about how to achieve their goals. More than this, though, simply coming to the MMR and interacting with other students was, in retrospect, a powerful and important tool in building community in the Department of English Language and Culture.

Naturally, thanks to the pandemic, all aspects of student life lost much of this community aspect during the semester that was spent entirely online, and in following weeks and months when face-to-face student interactions were kept at a minimum. However, even after returning to nearly-full face-to-face teaching, as the graded reader assignments continued being administered online, many students simply had little reason to come in to the MMR, as beyond checking out books for graded readers, students only needed to use the room for printing occasional reports, or solitary computer work.

This is potentially troubling when one considers

the works of Tinto (1988) and other researchers into new-student success and retention at university. Creating positive relationships in the university setting is critical for new students, and depriving our first-year students in particular with a potential such source of helpful relationships not only with their cohort but also with upperclassmen is potentially detrimental to their success in their university studies.

6 Discussion and Conclusions: The Future of the ER Program

Taken together, this situation presents something of a dilemma for the faculty dealing with graded readers at the Department of English Language and Culture.

On one hand, moving to a virtual graded reader system seems to have progressed quite smoothly from the students' point of view, with no appreciable negative effects either in student engagement with graded readers, or success rates with completion of their assignments. Students and faculty both report that the online graded reader system is at worst no more difficult to use than the paper book system (this point of view being expressed primarily from the student side) and at best considerably easier (from the faculty side). While some students profess to prefer the paper book system, an essentially equal number prefer the new ebook system. In terms of administration of the program, faculty are in agreement that the new online system is in most ways an improvement.

However, the important effect on community-building and cohesion cannot be overlooked. The Department of English Language and Culture has noticed a decline in the usage of the MMR since returning to face-to-face classes after the COVID-19 pandemic. While this cannot be laid entirely at the feet of the move to an online graded reader program—at the very least, this might be a fruitful area to investigate rigorously, not only to back up faculty and student anecdotal feelings of decreased usage, but to attempt to better explain real causes—informal discussions among faculty and with students do suggest that the new system may at least be a factor. Traditionally, the Multimedia Room has been an important social hub for the students of the department, and faculty consider it

a key aspect of departmental community building.

For this reason, the faculty of the Department of English Language and Culture are considering piloting a move to a so-called “hybrid” graded reader system, allowing students to continue to do much of the assignment online, but requiring some degree of usage of traditional books, checked out from the Multimedia Room. While this would necessarily make the system slightly more complicated, as management of the physical library of books was always one of the more challenging aspects of the system, the department feels that these challenges are outweighed by potential benefits in terms of relationship- and community-building amongst the students of the department.

Naturally, piloting such a program will require follow-up research to gauge efficacy and outcomes, but the generally positive learning outcomes with the move to online graded reader system gives the faculty of the Department of English Language and Culture confidence that such a program is both viable and potentially beneficial for the students of the department and not only their English-language learning goals, but their success in the department and at Chubu University.

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COVID-19の向こう側—オンライン多読教材と対面授業とその融合

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要 旨

2020年初頭のCOVID-19パンデミックにより、中部大学の授業の多くは対面式からオンライン授業へ突然移行しオンライン学習法へ軸足を余儀なくされた。英語英米文化学科も同様にオンライン学習法へ移行し、同学科の直面した最大の課題のひとつは「多読カリキュラム」だった。パンデミック以前は、1. 2年生の一般英語コースワークの重要な一環として、学生はグレーデッドリーダー図書館にて「Graded Readers」の本等を借りて「多読」が出来たが、パンデミック後は学生がキャンパスに来ることが出来なくなった為に同学科はオンラインによる代替手段を早急に見つけそれを導入する必要に迫られた。幸い、そのような「代替手段」は見つかったが、学生の多読課題への取り組みと多読課題に参加した学生の学習成果の結果にどのように影響を与えたかを判断する事は難しかった。その為、英語英米文化学科の教員は、この代替手段を「新しいオンライン・プログラム」として評価し、今後もオンライン・プログラムを継続するか、以前から使用していた従来のプログラムに戻すかの判断材料とする為に「新しいオンライン・プログラム」と「従来のプログラム」の両方における学生の体験に焦点を当てた調査を実施した。その結果、新しいオンライン・プログラムは、学生の「Graded readers」に対する学習意欲や、それに関連した学習成果に大きなマイナスの影響を及ぼさなかったことが判明したが、同じ学科内の学生同士のつながりと人間関係の構築にはあまり良い成果は出ていないかも知れない。

キーワード

英語教育、オンライン ラーニング、多読