Empowering Student Source Selection through Reflection

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Abstract

Extensive reading is a highly impactful aspect of learning a foreign language (Krashen, 1993; Nation 2009) and graded readers are often used in academic institutions as a way to provide students with access to appropriate material in this regard. Yet little research has been done into the effectiveness of raising student awareness regarding their reflection on choosing appropriate extensive reading material and improving subsequent choices to maximise acquisition gains (Lyon & Barr, 2019). This study focuses on the development of material that facilitates autonomy and helps students reflect on their choice of graded readers within the academic context of a university in Japan. The authors investigate the current state of graded reader use within this context and discuss the formulation of tools to analyse student attitudes towards them.

Keywords: extensive reading, graded readers, reflection, motivation, autonomy, action research

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Introduction

A significant source of second language input for language learners comes in the form of extensive reading. Many researchers advocate for its importance and its ability to serve different learning purposes in academic settings (Krashen, 1993; Grabe & Stoller, 2001; Nation, 2001, 2009; Waring & Takaki, 2003; Maruyama, 2009). The context of this study is one such academic setting: The English Language Institute (ELI) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan. Developing students' extensive reading fluency skills is one of the core outcomes created by the ELI and is typically introduced through activities in the first or second year of a four-year course. This outcome also reflects the seminal definition of extensive reading described by Richards, Platt & Platt (1992) in the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics as a way "...to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading" (p. 133). However, studies have shown that, while most Japanese university students are able to recognise the basic 3,000 word families (Mochizuki & Aizawa, 2000; Nonoka, 2004; Saida, 2006), they "...do not have the range necessary to read unsimplified texts and guess unknown words from context" (Maruyama, 2009, p.27). To get the most out of extensive reading, many institutions provide students with graded readers. These are "...books written for learners of English using limited lexis and syntax" (Hill, 2008, p. 185). These simplified texts give students the opportunity to encounter written language where they can understand 95-100% of the words. This level of word coverage is significant, as it allows them to process texts fluently (Nation, 2001). However, Barr & Lyon (2017) have reported that some learners in the ELI struggle to choose graded readers appropriate to their level. This has inspired the authors of this study to investigate the student experience of interacting with graded readers in their first two years of study at the ELI in KUIS, and, through the lens of Action Research (AR), to develop tools that explore the

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connection between reflective source selection and learner motivation. This latter focal point fits hand-in-hand with the overarching aim at KUIS to foster autonomy in its students. Encouraging agency in selecting their own learning material gives learners an active role in the learning process (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989).

Literature Review

Graded Readers: Benefits and Guidelines for Implementation

Extensive reading activities are an indispensable part of language learning, as they not only contribute to reading fluency (Nation, 1997) (which in itself is a desirable skill for most learners) but also correlate with the development of associated skills, such as writing (Hafiz & Tudor, 1990) and oral communication ability (Huang & Naerssen, 1987). Successful completion of extensive reading (often referred to as *pleasure reading*) tasks in turn affects learners' attitudes towards their studies and motivation for further reading (Nuttall, 1982).

The definitions of extensive reading presented in the literature offer four characterising features: "a large amount of reading, easy materials, faster reading rate, and pleasure" (Yamashita, 2015, p. 169). A variety of easily accessible authentic texts makes these principles attainable in higher-level language classrooms. However, in line with Krashen's (1985) Input Theory and Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development Hypothesis, authentic materials are not as suitable for lower to intermediate-level students. Moreover, using authentic texts as extensive reading materials in the initial stages of language learning might result in adverse effects such as hindering the development of reading fluency and leading the learners to adopt negative attitudes towards reading (Maruyama, 2009).

Graded readers are instrumental in bridging the gap between adapted and authentic reading comprehension. As opposed to authentic texts, graded readers series are designed with consideration to learners' needs. They provide a more controlled version of extensive reading by recycling the limited but necessary vocabulary from chapter to chapter and from book to book, scaffolding the transition from basic to more complex texts (Nation, Waring, 2019). The effect of choosing appropriate graded readers has been documented as improving intensive reading, writing and grammar skills (Van Wyk, 2007), increasing reading rate (Kusanagi, 2004; Iwahori, 2008), language proficiency (Bell, 2001; Sheu, 2003), attitude (Cho & Krashen, 1994), motivation (Elley, 1991; Takase, 2003), vocabulary knowledge (Horst, 2005), reading, listening, and writing proficiency (Elley & Mangubhai, 1981; Janopoulos, 1986), and providing opportunities to see different perspectives on various issues (Maruyama, 2009). Other benefits of extensive graded reading include creating conditions for incidental vocabulary acquisition and improving reading fluency (Nation & Ming-tzu, 1999).

There are specific premises to consider when teaching extensive reading. At higher levels of graded readers (2000+ words) it is recommended that learners choose the texts that are tailored to their language learning goals, e.g. academic vs general English (Nation & Ming-tzu, 1999). Based on existing research, Day and Bamford (2002) formulated the following 10 principles for successful use of extensive reading in language learning, which can be extrapolated to extensive graded reading. The materials should mostly include familiar vocabulary; learners should be allowed to choose their reading and should read as much as possible (a rate of one book per week is suggested) with the goal of further increasing their reading speed. Reading should be an individual and silent activity that learners enjoy as a "reward in itself" (p. 138). Finally, the teacher should be regarded not only as a guide but also as a role model of a reader (Nation & Ming-tzu,

1999). Also, depending on the learners' goals, the recommended difficulty level for the graded readers will vary slightly: 99-100% and 95-98% of familiar words for fluency development and vocabulary improvement respectively (Nation, 2001, as cited in Maruyama, 2009).

Clearly, awareness of these principles is beneficial, if not essential for language teachers who use extensive reading in their classrooms. However, learners can also find value in understanding their learning processes. Research indicates that metacognitive instruction positively affects learners' overall language performance as well as motivation (Raoofi et al., 2014), which confirms the need for materials that would encourage students to reflect on their learning strategies.

Autonomy and Motivation

As mentioned above, in order to achieve the greatest benefit from graded readers, learners need to select and evaluate their own reading materials and reflect on their learning strategies. To accomplish these tasks, learners need to exercise autonomy. Autonomy is also an important element of motivation, which is why at KUIS the ELI department takes great care to foster student autonomy. Self-determination theory, a framework for understanding human motivation and personality, views autonomy as one of the three basic human needs required for motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Motivation can be categorised into various ways, but a commonly accepted dichotomy within self-determination theory and motivational research is the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is generated from within and comes from one's own drives and ambitions, whereas extrinsic motivation is created from external factors, like peer pressure or seeking rewards. Higher intrinsic motivation within learners can lead to greater learning effectiveness, as students are more likely to

grasp abstract concepts, solve problems, and maintain their motivation over a prolonged period of time (Benson, 2011). When teachers grant more autonomy within the classroom, intrinsic motivation increases within students. Conversely, when teachers show more controlling behaviours that do not foster autonomy and rely more on extrinsic motivational factors, intrinsic motivation decreases (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Furthermore, studies have shown that when students feel that their teacher helps foster their autonomy over their learning, they are more likely to be engaged in and out of the classroom, as well as exercise higher levels of autonomy (Lamb, 2019). Takagi (2003) found that autonomy positively correlated to class participation and attendance, suggesting not only higher levels of motivation, but also of engagement. Additionally, research has shown that teachers who foster autonomy in the classroom are more likely to be attuned to the learner's needs and perspectives and are better able to adapt their teaching to their learners, further fostering student motivation (Ryan et al., 2023). Spratt et al. (2002) suggest that, although learner autonomy can increase intrinsic motivation, learners must possess some level of prior intrinsic motivation first and are unlikely to engage in autonomous learning otherwise. However, Ushioda (2011) challenges this perspective, stating that research suggests autonomy can still increase motivation in unmotivated students and that autonomy should be seen as more nuanced. Ushioda states that there are two types of autonomy: taking responsibility for and regulating one's own learning, and the psychological need to have agency in one's actions. Ushiodia argues that the later definition of autonomy fosters intrinsic motivation, which then in turn leads to the development of the former.

Autonomy and Reflection

While research suggests that more autonomous learners are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, how effectively learners utilise that autonomy to make progress

depends largely on their ability to meaningfully reflect on their learning (Kato & Mynard, 2016). For autonomous learning to be transformative, critical reflection is required, and with any skill, this takes time to develop. Kato and Mynard (2016) outline a Learning Trajectory to categorise the stages of awareness learners have of their learning. Learners who have not previously exercised much autonomy over their learning are less likely to be aware of their learning needs and will have a harder time making appropriate choices to meet those needs. Learners who are adept at making decisions about their learning and have reflected deeply on their learning processes are more likely to not only make appropriate choices, but also be able to identify alternatives and understand why these choices are effective. In addition, learners are more likely to be motivated and have better metacognitive awareness when they practise deeper reflection (Huang, 2021). Educators can foster this growth by providing greater guidance in the reflective process when learners are at earlier stages, and by challenging perspectives and encouraging self-initiated reflection at the later stages of development. Nix (2007) shows evidence of this when describing how effectively students were able to make decisions regarding their learning. Students who were able to reflect deeply on their learning processes and needs were able to see more benefit from autonomous learning than those who made choices with less consideration of their own learning styles. Research by Takagi (2003) also concluded that, if learners were unaccustomed to autonomous learning, more support would yield better results. Additionally, Ambinintsoa and MacDonald (2023) found that the depth of student reflection increased with guiding reflective activities, but also that some level of student control over the reflective process is necessary to maximise its effectiveness. Therefore, research seems to suggest that if educators can provide support and opportunity for reflection during autonomous learning, learners will likely benefit in many ways.

Action Research

KUIS as an institution has in recent years increased its usage of AR, seeing it as viable for teams of teachers working on improving class practice. The process of AR is further suggested as suitable for group, departmental and institutional settings by Burns et al. (2022) with the purpose of their publication being to '... provide support for those wishing to facilitate AR for groups of teachers within institutions' (p. 1). This action research will look to affect the group of authors' practices as well as those of others within the university, in order to better aid students in their awareness of suitable selections for extensive reading.

The usefulness of AR comes about through that interweaving of the two seemingly opposed exercises of taking action and doing research. It is a valuable and dynamic approach that empowers educators in identifying and addressing challenges they face themselves, and problematic areas for learners, systematically through reflection on the teacher's own classroom and planning practices and student reactions. It is linked to self and class reflection with teachers generating their own solutions to fit problems within their specific teaching context according to Burns (2010) and is characterised by its cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting as illustrated by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, cited in Burns, 2010, pp. 7-9), aimed at solving practical problems or improving specific practices within a particular context, in this case as stated previously, aiding and empowering students in their extensive reading material choices.

Macalister (2007) researched the effectiveness of introducing ER into an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class through AR methods and in doing so, presented ways in which it might be introduced to students in classes within their context, and concluded that 'The inclusion of extensive reading as a component of an EAP programme was

positively received by the learners' (p. 254). Lyons and Barr's (2017, 2019) previous studies into the ELI's attempts at ER usage are both relevant, and a strong foundation to this further research being undertaken to make sure that ER is effective in this setting. To reiterate, the important points to be considered and highlighted are what future actions will be taken to aid students even more with their ER methods, goals and motivation through sound selection of ER sources.

Proposed Methodology and Limitations, Implications, and Future Objectives

The study by Lyon & Barr (2019) serves as a useful foundation for the intended objective of this proposed research and will assist in the design of the questionnaire for this research. The main objective is to measure learner attitudes towards graded readers, and their feedback will be used to design awareness-raising activities so that they can reflect and autonomously choose extensive reading materials appropriate for their level. This will in turn maximise potential second language acquisition gains via extensive reading.

Participants will consist of freshman and sophomore KUIS students who are currently doing the Foundational Literacies course within the ELI which focuses on text writing through genres and extensive and intensive reading.

Participant responses will be collected using a Google Form questionnaire. A Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very) will be used in order to establish to what extent each participant agrees with certain statements, and also short-answer text questions pertaining to reading they may or may not do outside of regular class time.

The Likert scale questions will ask participants for feedback relating to three key aspects of graded readers: motivation, reading done outside of regular classes, and selection. For motivation, participants will be asked to what extent that they are motivated to read teacher-selected graded readers and those they choose themselves as well as how useful they think they are for their learning. The outside reading aspect will focus on to what extent participants are motivated to read and how useful they think graded readers are for their self-study in their free time. The final section will ask participants about the selection process of choosing a graded reader and the degree of importance for certain features. These features will include design, illustrations, genre, reviews, novelisation of a famous movie or television series, themes, length, language difficulty, and story. Additionally, participants will be asked to what extent teacher and friend recommendations are important in their text selection.

The short-answer text boxes will be used to obtain more specific information from each participant such as individual graded reader choices and how often they read them. The Likert scale responses will be useful to gain an overview of how participants choose their source selection, and their short answers will provide more insight as to the types of materials they enjoy reading.

There are various anticipated limitations of this methodology along with proposed resolutions. Firstly, as ELI lecturers are given classroom autonomy for their reading classes, it is possible that graded readers are used more in some classes than others, if at all. Participants who are less familiar with graded readers will be given a chance to become more aware of their purpose and features before completing the questionnaire. This can be done by guiding them to one of the libraries on KUIS campus and giving them time to browse through the available selection, or alternatively allowing them to

peruse through a selection of graded readers during regular class time and encouraging them to discuss their ideas with their fellow classmates.

Secondly, connected to the previous potential limitation is the issue of sufficient class time to introduce graded readers to participants. Only two Foundational Literacies classes are taught each week to each group of students so class time may be limited as there is an intensive curriculum which focuses on improving reading and writing skills in a multitude of ways. To work around this, a minimum of 4 weeks will be given before collecting questionnaires to familiarise potential participants with graded readers.

Thirdly, the potential issue of insufficient participant responses will be countered by approaching all Foundational Literacies lecturers to share the questionnaire with their students in their respective classes. For any statistical analysis, Cohen et al. (2000) claim that a minimum of 30 participants is a suitable baseline from which to obtain reliable results. There are typically more than 300 students who undertake the Foundational Literacies course each year which will enable a sufficient sample size to be achieved.

Fourthly, as previously mentioned, Krashen's (1985) Input Theory states that learners should choose materials that do not greatly exceed their ability. It is possible that learners may choose graded readers that are unsuitably challenging thereby limiting potential acquisition gains through extensive reading. To rectify this, participants will be asked on the questionnaire to consider and reflect upon the difficulty of graded readers and to what extent they understand the content.

The main potential implication of this proposed research is to provide more groundwork for learners to be more reflective in autonomously choosing level-appropriate extensive

reading sources. Should enough awareness be raised as to the importance of level-appropriate materials, a further implication could be expanding the selection of available extensive reading materials within KUIS libraries in order to cater for a wider range of learner abilities. Such an expansion will not only bolster the already impressive level of facilities available to learners, but will also help facilitate their second language acquisition gains.

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