

## **A Report of an Out of Class Reading Activity**

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### **Abstract**

This activity aimed to utilize the university computer intranet system and to provide Japanese university students with lots of input out of the classroom. By participating in this activity for one semester, the students were expected to develop their meta-cognitive strategies, and eventually to reduce their reading failure perception.

Many students surveyed (Takahashi, 2003) had the belief that they did not read English texts well. A factor analysis showed that the students attributed this failure to their learning environment, ability, effort, the text difficulty, and task orientation. Furthermore, a significant relationship between the students' perceptions of their 'ability' and their reading proficiency was found in the study, which implies that students' perceptions of their ability predict their reading proficiency. In other words, a strong belief in ability might produce greater success in performance. It was therefore proposed that students should have some meta-cognitive strategy training.

Twenty university students in western Japan participated in the activity. The activity was given to the students as an out of class reading activity for one semester. The out of class reading activity was independent from the in-class activities. This activity was conducted using the university computer intranet network.

The students read a text from an English language newspaper at a comfortable reading level for themselves. As they did the activity, they were expected to develop their reading skills and their self-monitoring skills. Specifically, students could choose any article from the newspaper which had been assigned as the week's activity. The directions for their task were posted on the homepage of the university computer intranet network. Every week, students had to answer some Likert-scale questions, which clarified their comprehension of the text, the difficulty of the text, their degree of interest, and their liking for the text. The statistical analysis indicated that a significant difference existed between the students' answers at the beginning and those at the end of the study only in "effort".

Further study is now taking place by increasing the number of participants and investigating whether or not students develop their meta-cognitive skills by this method.

This study is a practice report of an out of classroom activity. The idea started when it was found that 252 out of the 269 students (93.3%) at the university the author is teaching

at felt they did not read well (Takahashi, 2003). Moreover, the first cause they attributed their failure to was the learning environment.

Many students of the university where I am teaching report they avoid English texts in their daily life. Most of them feel they do not read English texts well. Although a large amount of input is necessary for EFL students, most students do not read English outside the classroom. The Internet is available everywhere thanks to mobile phones, so anybody who wishes to access English homepages can do so, but students are less likely to access English texts. It is difficult to know whether an insufficient amount of reading brings about an unwillingness to read, or the lack of motivation to read leads to low reading proficiency.

The statement above leads to two implications for teaching second language reading at different stages in the curriculum. First, teachers should know that a large percentage of their students may feel a general sense of failure when reading English. Some new ideas on curriculum and material are necessary. Lower proficiency students, in particular, need to have help to increase their willingness to read. For the purpose of initiating their motivation to read, some new approaches, such as extensive reading, should be included in their required reading courses.

Secondly, the finding that the participants primarily attribute their reading failure to environmental factors is important. As Williams and Burden (1999) concluded in their study, teachers must understand how learners make sense of external influences as they shape their internal attribution. Teachers should provide their students with a better curriculum and a learning environment more conducive to improving their reading. Teachers should nurture an environment that encourages learners to construct their own language learning process in the most helpful way.

### **Designing an Out of Class Activity**

#### ***Students' Interest***

Although the objective of the reading activity is to increase the students' reading skills, not all students are willing to read English texts. However, some interesting topics may motivate students to read. In order to attract less motivated students, the teacher should know what students want and need. One reason students are interested in a certain topic may be that they want to know more about it. Another is that the topic touches their lives in a personal way. A further reason is that students may feel they need to become more informed about the topic. When selecting interesting topics for an out of class activity, those three kinds of interest should be taken into consideration.

### ***Students' Language Proficiency***

When students read beyond their language proficiency level, they are overwhelmed. When they meet a great deal of unknown language, they feel frustrated. If the grammar structures are long and complex, they get tired and give up reading. Because this proposal is an out of class activity, the level of the reading passage should be just below the students' language proficiency. The aim is to have them continue reading, not have them analyze and detect the structures.

### ***Selecting Appropriate Materials***

The use of either authentic or modified texts is a debatable issue. There has been a trend to use authentic materials in second language reading regardless of the students' language proficiency level. Having even a small degree of comprehension of authentic materials can give students confidence in dealing with reading for real purposes. Making the text appropriate to the level of language mastery is important, but setting the level according to the students' degree of mental development is even more important.

### ***Preparing a Good Learning Environment***

As was mentioned above, students primarily attributed their reading failure to environmental factors. As Williams and Burden (1999) concluded in their study, teachers must understand how learners make sense of external influences as they shape internal attribution. Teachers have to prepare an environment that encourages learners to construct their own language learning in the most helpful way.

### ***Evaluation and Final Course Grades***

Evaluation and final course grades are closely related with the course goals and the objective of the activity. If the objective of the activity is that "students will be able to read an informational text on a certain topic under timed conditions and correctly identify the topic and 80% of the main ideas with 70% accuracy," the evaluation of this activity should be added to the final course grade. However, the objective of this out of class activity is to facilitate students' reading and motivate them to read. Participation in the activity is important. Thus, the teacher should rather factor the students' preparation, class participation (including the outside the classroom activity participation), other evaluative tasks, and test scores into the calculations of the final course grade, not the scores of this activity.

In order to prepare a more accessible learning environment and desirable input, some

important points should be considered:

1. A good circle of motivation should be created.  
If students are provided with a great deal of input, they are very likely to start reading. One push will initiate the students' motivation. They may remain motivated if they constantly receive input.
2. The tasks should be useful for both high proficiency and low proficiency students.  
In the classroom there are higher-proficiency and lower-proficiency students. Since English is a required subject in the university curriculum, a task should suit both high and low proficiency students.
3. The most up-to-date texts should be used.  
The students are very sensitive to changes in trends in the world. The most up-to-date texts can attract their attention.
4. The Internet/Intranet system can be used.  
In the university both internet and intranet systems are prepared as teaching tools. The students need to catch up with world trends and know how to use computers and learn what to use them for.
5. The completion of each task should be evaluated and be taken as part of the final grade.  
Unless the task is evaluated and is taken as part of their grades, the students will not take it seriously. A little pressure will be necessary for initiating and continuing the task.

### **Activity**

An out of class reading activity was designed for first year university students for the purpose of developing their reading skills in English. There were some lowly-motivated students who just wanted to get through the required courses, while other highly-motivated students hoped to improve their reading skills. It was thought that this program would be useful for both types of students because lowly-motivated students might be interested in developing their computer literacy.

The activity was made using the intranet network of the university computer system. The objective was to have learners read texts from an English language newspaper and have them develop their reading skills and metacognitive strategies. Every week learners were required to read an article of an assigned English newspaper. They could choose any article of the assigned newspaper at their comfortable reading level. According to the directions which appeared on the homepage of the university intranet system, the students had to complete a questionnaire and write a summary (within 30 words). They were told that this task would be evaluated and that the completion of this task would be put into their

final grade.

All the teacher needed to do was to put up directions every week, telling the students which newspaper to read. The teacher posted these on her Web site. The Teacher's Role and the Students' Role for the activity were as follows.

The teacher's role:

1. The teacher had to give some instructions on computer use. Before starting the activity, the teacher simulated how to use the WWW browser, how to access the web site, and how to do the activity.
2. The teacher posted directions assigning a certain English newspaper to the homepage every week.

The students' role:

1. The students had instruction regarding computer use.
2. They had to choose an article of an assigned newspaper at their comfortable reading level. They had to complete an article report sheet and submit it to the teacher at the next class. This continued for one semester.

## **Results**

### ***Students' Responses***

Before the students started this activity, they were given another type of out of class reading activity (described in Takahashi, 2004), where they had to read an assigned newspaper article and answer comprehension questions prepared by the teacher. After the students finished one cycle of both activities, they were asked which activity type they preferred. Since all of them preferred the second activity, this activity was chosen and continued until the end of the semester (7 times). The reason they preferred the second activity to the first was that they could choose any article which they liked. They chose an article which they could read with ease.

All the students enthusiastically performed this activity. They answered the Likert-scaled questions regarding their comprehension of the text, the difficulty of the text, their degree of interest, their degree of efforts, and their liking for the text. They also wrote a summary (within 30 words). Their summaries of the articles assured the teacher that they really had read the text because the teacher assumed that the answers to the Likert-scaled questions would not show clear evidence of their performance.

### ***Teacher's response***

For the teacher, the second activity was much easier to conduct because she did not

have to prepare the comprehension questions every week. All the teacher had to do was to check whether the students had completed the article report sheet and whether they had chosen the most suitable article for their reading level. The teacher was satisfied with the students' responses because she could check that the students were willing to perform the present activity.

### ***Students' reports***

One more important consideration was whether students had developed their self-reflection skills (meta-cognitive strategies), which was the first intention of this study. If they had, they were more conscious of their own reading and noticed the gap between the input and their language. It would be ideal if they chose a text most suitable to their level. A text just above or below their present level would be the most suitable level. If they chose and read an English text appropriate to their level, they could read the text without difficulty and continue reading. The statistical analysis indicates that a significant difference existed only in "effort" between the students' answers of June and those of July ( $F = 6.158, p = .028$ ) although the students were also asked about their comprehension of the text, the difficulty of the text, their degree of interest, and their liking for the text. In order to clarify whether or not students develop their self-reflective skills by this method, it will be necessary to increase the number of the participants and the length of the time lag between the analyses.

Further study will be necessary to examine whether the students still feel they do not read well after the reading activity. In order to check for any improvement in students' perceptions of their reading failure, a questionnaire survey about their reading performance should be conducted at the beginning and the end of this activity.

### **References**

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