

Establishing an extensive summer reading programme: Issues of design, implementation, and context

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This paper details the establishment of a summer reading programme for university students in Japan. The primary focus is upon the design and implementation of the programme within a specific institutional context, a liberal arts college in which students undertake a semi-intensive course of study in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Providing students with guidance and the freedom to select their own materials, the programme serves to facilitate learner autonomy as well as reinforce and build upon the language and critical thinking skills developed during the spring term. Equally important, it also introduces students to the wider world of English, and to the achievement and enjoyment of reading in English. It is an activity positively received, one with benefits for student confidence, motivation, engagement, ownership (Widdowson, 1994), and self-directed learning.

稿は日本の大学での夏期リーディングプログラム設立の詳細を述べるものである。重要な焦点は、学生がセミインテンシブな学術的な目的のための英語 (EAP) コースを受講するリベラルアーツ大学という特定の状況でのプログラムの計画、実施という点がある。夏期リーディングプログラムでは、学生が教材を自由に選択する指導を行うことにより、春学期中のEAPプログラムを通じて養われる英語力およびクリティカルシンキングスキルの向上強化とともに、学習者の自律性の促進に効果的である。同様に重要なのは、学生をより広い英語の世界、リーディング活動の楽しみと達成感へと導入する点である。学生が積極的に受けとめ、彼らの自信、取り組み方、動機、ownership (Widdowson, 1994) と自律的な学習を高めるのに効果的な活動といえる。

The benefits of extensive reading programmes for L2 learners are well documented (Bamford & Day, 1997; Brusch, 1991; Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Krashen, 1993; Robb & Susser, 1989). There is also an extensive body of materials on how to organise and implement such programmes (Bamford, 1984; Bright & McGregor, 1970; Hedge, 1985; Hill, 1992; Nuttall,

1996). Emphasising reading for pleasure, sustained reading, and voluntary reading, such programmes are argued to “build vocabulary and structural awareness, develop automaticity, enhance background knowledge, improve comprehension skills and promote confidence and motivation” (Grabe, 1991, p. 380). Although materials written for native-speakers are not precluded, it is usual to give primacy to materials written specifically for the L2 learner. Thus, as noted by Bamford (1984), “for all but advanced learners, the best way to promote extensive reading is by means of graded readers” (p. 218).

This paper examines how one programme was initiated and implemented to meet the needs of its’ own particular institutional context and student body, EFL students embarking on tertiary level education in English. For such students there is a pressing need to develop awareness of the lexical, discursal, and syntactic features of English, to enhance automaticity and comprehension. Extensive reading provides a means to accomplish this, giving exposure to large quantities of material, the *input* of Krashen’s (1985) Input Hypothesis. The programme makes use of native-speaker materials, seeks to encourage learner autonomy, takes place in the summer vacation, and concludes with a presentation and discussion of text(s) read. The intent is to get students to pursue their own interests and motivations, and, by so doing, build and exercise their English language skills. Following an introduction to the academic context and the student body, major determinants of the reading programme, the paper examines the reasoning behind the programme, its organisation, the process of materials selection, the guidance provided, and the after-reading task required of students.

Academic context

ICU is a small bilingual liberal arts college in Tokyo in which both English and Japanese are used as languages of instruction. During the first year all but a small number of students are enrolled in the English Language Programme (ELP), a one-year semi-intensive programme in English for academic purposes (EAP). This is a content-based programme spread over three ten-week terms and occupies the majority of the students’ time during the first year. The stated goals include the brief, “To provide students entering ... who are not yet proficient in English with the language training necessary to participate fully in university life” and also the “development of the basic academic critical thinking and study skills that facilitate a rationale and responsible approach to the acquisition of knowledge” (*ELP Staff Handbook*, 2005, p. 1).

Programme content

The core component of the EAP programme, Academic Reading and Writing (ARW), adopts a content-based approach. Acknowledging the work of Brinton, Snow, & Wesche (2003), ARW seeks “the integration of particular content with language teaching aims” and “the concurrent teaching of subject matter and second language skills” (as cited in *ELP Staff Handbook*, 2005, p. 2). The component is organised around a number of themes “in which content is provided in the form of readings and lectures all clustered under umbrella topics” (*ELP Staff Handbook*, 2005, p. 19). Major thematic areas include *Educational Values*; *Literature*; *Culture*, *Perception and Communication*; *Issues of Race*; *Bioethics*; and *Visions of the Future*.

The core text, *The ELP Reader*, is a dense text of 344 pages. It is a collection of demanding academic and semi-academic materials that are not edited or simplified in any way and includes full-length articles that would challenge native-speaker undergraduates. There are few diagrams and no pictures. Additionally, the *Reader* contains no language focused exercises, no reading comprehension questions, grammar or vocabulary exercises. It is a text whose primary focus is then not upon the teaching of grammar and lexis. Rather, it seeks to engage students in the use of English within a liberal arts context, a means to develop reading skills and a springboard to the development of critical thinking, discussion, and academic writing skills on intellectually challenging topics. The readings are read out of class with the students given an opportunity to seek clarification of content during the lesson. In class the main focus is upon active discussion of the ideas and concepts contained in the readings with the students expected to operate entirely in English from day one. Students are also required to make use of the university library and supplementary readings. From the first term, students are making use of multiple sources in the writing of fully documented academic papers and essays related to core concepts in the readings. This is a demanding programme, arguably one the most challenging in Japan.

The students

The annual student intake is between 650-670 students, the majority from high schools in which English has been a subject of study, not a language actively used for communicative and study purposes. However, the students

have chosen to enter a bilingual university aware that many courses will be taught entirely in English. They know their first year will be dominated by the ELP. For some this is a prime reason for choosing ICU. Additionally, the entrance examination is a highly selective one stressing English language competence as well as academic ability. In the 2005-06 academic year the average institutional TOEFL scores of new entrants was 511, the averages within the three streams of the ELP being 465 (Programme A), 524 (Programme B), and 590 (Programme C). A sizeable portion of the student body does therefore have a level of English sufficient for admission to university level study overseas.

In general, the students have a good knowledge of lexis and syntax. However, the majority are not skilled in using the language. The reading requirements of the programme can therefore be a shock. For most, reading in English has been limited to meeting the needs of the school classroom and the requirements of university entrance. This has usually consisted of intensive study and line-by-line translation of school texts and short passages. Reading in English at length, whether in-depth reading of lengthy academic texts or extensive reading of fiction or non-fiction for pleasure is something the majority have not done.

The previous summer assignment

In previous years during the summer vacation, students have been required to read and annotate a novel, maintain a reading journal, and then write a literary analysis essay of approximately 600 words. Students were expected to identify key elements of the novel: the plot, setting, characterisation, point of view, style, symbolism, and theme(s). Additionally,

they were asked to summarise and react to the events and ideas presented. The essay should make use of quotations, be fully documented, and demonstrate the application of critical thinking skills. Lastly, students were required to give a short 5-10 minute presentation to fellow students. The annotated text, essay, and presentation formed part of their assessment.

The assignment gave rise to a number of concerns related to intent, level of difficulty, student motivation, and assessment. For a number of the teachers there is a conviction that vacation study is a normal component of a quality university education and that such study should be academically challenging. Additionally, the study of literature is perceived to be an essential ingredient of a liberal arts education. Accordingly, the text selected should have literary merit and permit of literary analysis. A number of works by Nobel prize-winning authors have previously been chosen and in recent years *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. However, the requirement that all students read the same text gave insufficient recognition to the varying levels of student ability, individual interests, and motivations. Not everyone is interested in the Chinese-born mother and American-daughter relationships of *The Joy Luck Club*. Not everyone is ready to read a work of literature 350 pages in length. A survey of several classes revealed few male students found the subject matter appealing and for the female students the appeal was not universal. Additionally, few students will proceed to study literature, the majority going on to study in the natural and social sciences.

As a consequence of the above, it is questionable how many students read the text in English or indeed read the book at all. In a brief show of hands in two Programme B classes 50% of

students indicated they had not read the book in English and approximately 70% that they had read the book in Japanese. Nearly all had watched the film, used related Internet sites, and resorted to published study notes. In a Programme A class the percentages were higher. Noticeably, less than a handful indicated they had read any other material in English. In other words, for perhaps a majority of students, no reading in English at length was occurring despite the intent of the assignment. In seeking to explain this the level of difficulty of the text, subject matter, and assessment by written assignment are factors to be considered.

In addition to the issues of level, interest, and assessment there is also the fact that the students were on holiday. Having worked hard throughout their final year at high school, attended cram schools (*juku*) and taken a number of demanding university entrance examinations, the students are confronted with a high-pressure first term at university in which they are required to function most of the time in a foreign language. At the end of the spring term the students are noticeably tired. Needless to say, some undoubtedly gave their holiday a higher priority than literary analysis.

The summer assignment did fit the programme's views of academic respectability but arguably fell short of its primary purpose, to get the students to read. In part this reflected a mismatch between the aims of the programme and much of the student body. However, it also reflected a failure on the part of the programme to have shared and agreed goals in mind, to fully appreciate the nature and purpose of extensive reading. Extensive reading is above all about permitting students to read widely, pursuing their interests and motivations and in the process making active

use of, reinforcing, and building their English language skills. It should be primarily an activity of enjoyment, one bolstering of student confidence in their ability to make use of a language and encouraging students to read, to pick up another book for no other purpose than that it is a worthwhile activity. This should not be confused with the reading of one lengthy text, certainly not if that text is to be annotated, analysed for its literary characteristics, and a formal academic essay required. That is intensive reading at length. Additionally, given how time-consuming the study of a novel can be, such an activity might actually deny students the time to read in English.

The summer reading programme

The *Summer Reading Programme* was introduced in an attempt to refocus the summer assignment upon student choice and reading for pleasure. This represented an attempt to gain greater recognition within the ELP of the nature and benefits of extensive reading. The intent was to:

- Encourage more students to read in English during their summer vacation
- Encourage students to read extensively
- Introduce students to the wide variety of materials available in English
- Fulfil programme needs for language exposure during the vacation
- Encourage students to read beyond programme requirements and by so doing perceive reading in English to be a natural and enjoyable activity

- Build student confidence in their ability to read and comprehend full-length books written for native-speakers
- Create a sense of ownership in which individuals function naturally in English

The above would require greater recognition of student autonomy. It would be essential to permit students to choose texts according to their own personal interests and motivations. Additionally, books should be at a level appropriate to the individual, texts not requiring heavy use of a dictionary and translation. To facilitate this process of selection teacher guidance would be required, the students having little knowledge concerning the suitability of texts, the choices available to them, or sources of books in English. Selection of texts should therefore be done before the end of the spring term. This would enable students to consult teachers and fellow students about possible reading materials. Students would then have the text before the start of the vacation; not be searching around for a text at the end of the vacation. The *Summer Reading Programme* would therefore require more attention to planning and teacher engagement with students than was previously the case. Lastly, if students were to read extensively, pressure of assessment by a written essay should be removed.

The reading list

To assist students in making their choice of book(s) an extensive list of recommended texts was handed out and placed on the ELP website (<subsite.icu.ac.jp/elp/Summer_Reading_List.htm>). Students do not have to choose from

the list. The list serves as a guide only. It indicates the possibilities available, presenting students with the widest possible choice of subject matter and a range of levels of difficulty, both of language and content. This reflected a concern that problems associated with the previous summer assignment were in part the result of teacher hegemony, a failure to give sufficient recognition to student needs and autonomy. It was hoped the students would find among the suggestions texts they found informative, entertaining, thought provoking, and motivating. The following were included:

Non-Fiction

Education
Religion
Philosophy
Politics
History
Biography / Autobiography
Japan
Economics / Business
Language
The Arts
Science and Technology
Ethics
Travel / Adventure

Fiction

Human Interest
Adventure / Thriller
Science Fiction
Fantasy
Children's Literature
Romance
Crime
Short Stories
Poetry
Film Scripts
Novels mentioned in
course readings

All of the books on the *Reading List* are written for native-speakers of English. In part, this reflects the nature of the

programme and the ability of the students. The students have spent the first term reading lengthy and demanding academic articles together with a full-length work of literature, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. They are nevertheless free to select children's literature and teachers are free to guide individual students as appropriate. However, for many of the teachers (and students), there is a desire that the students read 'real' books. Additionally, a programme that in the past has required its students to study demanding literary texts by Nobel prize-winning authors would not approve of a list comprised largely of graded materials. In other words, the changes made reflect both an attempt to recognise student abilities, needs, and motivations, but also the diversity of opinion within the teaching body. Changes made to the ELP must be approved and voted upon at a general meeting of the full teaching body of approximately 30 teachers.

Teacher commitment and guidance

In motivating students to read and make their selections teacher commitment and guidance are essential. The fact that teachers perceive reading to be important does not mean that students have the same perception. It is after all an activity neither emphasised at school nor required for university entrance. There are also the demands of the students' other studies, part-time jobs, clubs, boy- and girlfriends, the Internet, computer games and TV, etc. It is therefore important that the teacher sells the importance of reading. Clear guidance on choosing a book is also required, the importance of choosing a text that is both interesting and appropriate. Importantly, it should be stressed that it is OK not to finish a 'boring' text and select another. Struggling

with a book that is too difficult or boring is not going to build automaticity, confidence, or active reading.

Developing student awareness of the wide range of possibilities open to them is vital. However, it is insufficient to tell students there is a reading-list on a website. This does not signify the importance of the task and a long list can be off-putting to the novice reader. When students are only one term away from high school it is doubtful how much they have adapted to a more self-directed and autonomous approach to learning. Handing out a list in class or using an OHP and talking the students through the list, pointing out subject areas and levels of difficulty, books the teacher has read and liked, raises awareness. It is also helpful if students select 5-10 books that they think might be interesting, research them, and share their findings with each other. Internet sites such as Amazon contain useful information and reviews. Students should visit university and local libraries and take their book-list with them, browse books on the list and any others that attract their interest. Students also need to be provided with a list of bookstores and Internet sites selling English language books, new and second hand. It is unreasonable to expect Japanese students to know where to buy English language books, even more so when they are new to a city. Bookstores are excellent places for browsing, for reading back covers and dipping into books. Students should also be encouraged to talk to friends, ask what they have read and would recommend. What the teacher should not do, however, is press upon students the teacher's own favourite books and prejudices. If students fail to read a text, maybe it is because it was 'our' text in the first place. It is important that teachers impress upon students the value of

reading and provide guidance. It is equally important that students be permitted to make their own informed choices. If our students fail to give reading the attention it deserves, make choices we perceive to be disappointing, we might justly look not to the student but to context and teacher, to the guidance given, the assistance provided, the task set. As noted by Benson (2001, p. 53), "If the institutional context of learning or the immediate demands of the learning task do not value or reward autonomous behaviour, it is likely that the learners will be reluctant to exercise whatever capabilities for autonomy they have."

If we wish our students to become active readers, develop their linguistic awareness and automaticity, then opportunities for greater autonomy are essential ingredients of the learning context. This is recognised in Holec's (1981) principles of autonomy, stipulating the need for a situation to be conducive of autonomy, for recognition of rights to learn, and for the encouragement of student responsibility. Importantly, these principles also point to the need for a clear awareness by the teacher of the skills and abilities to be developed. These principles recur in the extensive literature on autonomy in language learning (Benson, 1996; Benson & Voller, 1997; Boud, 1988; Holec, 1985; Pemberton, R., Li, E., Or, W., & Pierson, H., 1996). Throughout is a common concern for "the enhancement of capacity, that development of cognitive and communicative ability which is itself ineluctably bound up with the recognition by the curriculum of both social and individual aspects of learning" (Candlin, xi). Extensive reading, individual needs, rights, and responsibilities go hand in hand and the teacher's task should be one of facilitation.

The final stage of the *Summer Reading Assignment* occurs during the first week back after the summer vacation. In small groups of 3 or 4, students are required to give a short presentation, approximately 7 minutes introducing a text followed by 8 minutes of discussion. Students are encouraged to use note cards and visuals, to speak and present to their group rather than read at them. The teacher circulates among the groups, listening, and taking part. This is a real opportunity to hear students talking about issues and texts of interest to themselves. Importantly, it is also an opportunity for students to hear what their classmates have read and to be motivated to read further. An alternative approach to the above is to require individuals to give a poster presentation.

Results to date

In seeking to assess the *Summer Reading Assignment* to date a number of questions arise. The first of these is, “Are the students better readers?” In truth, after only one summer any improvement is likely to be minimal. However, it is possible to say that reading skills were exercised and the motivation of many to read in English enhanced. In a survey of several classes when asked, “Did you read a complete book during the summer?” nearly everyone answered in the affirmative. When asked, “Did you read the book in English?” nearly all said they had. Such results obviously need to be viewed with scepticism. Nevertheless, the results appear to be in marked contrast to the experience of students in previous years doing the assigned *The Joy Luck Club* and accompanying essay. The above indicate a positive experience of the summer reading.

Perhaps more revealing of the changes made is that when asked, “Are you more likely to read additional books in English?” a majority of students stated they were. Whether they follow through with this is another question. There are however clear indications that they will. This can be seen in the number of students reporting reading multiple texts over the summer, those reading multiple texts in a series, the number changing and exchanging texts, the number saying they were encouraged to read a text as a result of a presentation. Certainly my own observations of the presentations made by students showed an enthusiasm and interest markedly missing from presentations in previous years when all presentations were concerned with the one set text. Undoubtedly this does reflect on the freedom of choice given to students to select their own reading material and the wide range of texts and subject matter they chose to read, fiction and non-fiction. It is reasonable to conclude that for most of the students the summer reading was a positive experience. They found reading in English something they could do and felt encouraged to continue. Importantly, this was a self-directed activity that they undertook during their holidays when no doubt most had other demands on their time.

Conclusion

The *Summer Reading Programme* marks a major change from previous practice. Although only recently instituted the indication is that the change has been a positive one. More students are reading in English in the summer. Perhaps more telling is that more students are reading more than one text and indicate a willingness to read additional materials. This

can only benefit their reading ability. In large measure this can be accounted for by the adoption of a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning. Among the most prominent features that can be identified are:

- *Teacher* guidance, enthusiasm and demonstration of the importance of reading
- *Freedom* for students to choose and change texts
- *An appeal* to student interests and motivations
- *An absence* of pressure to study and write about a text
- *Recognition* that priority given to ‘quality’ literature and ‘academic respectability’ may not serve the purpose of skills development and acquisition of the reading habit

Above all, the motivational element of students making their own choices and pursuing their own interests should not be underestimated.

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