

Academic Dishonesty in Extensive Reading Programs: Stories and Strategies from Student Interviews

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Extensive reading (ER) has become an accepted methodology in increasing student reading fluency. However, there are issues that teachers face when implementing an ER program. This study, completed at a small English-medium university in Japan, addressed a key problem in ER program implementation: student academic dishonesty. The research, based on student interviews and supplemented by teacher experience, identified five categories of academic dishonesty: (a) asking for a friend's help; (b) referring to online resources in lieu of reading or completing a reading report; (c) reading and writing about topics that were already familiar to the student; (d) watching movies instead of reading; and (e) others. The findings indicated an equal number of methodologies that are useful in countering academic dishonesty. It was suggested in the findings that, in addition to discouraging academic dishonesty in ER programs, the methodologies can also work to enhance the ER experience for students.

多読が学習者のリーディング力を高める上で効果的であることは広く認められてきた。しかし、多読プログラムを実行する際に教師はさまざまな問題に直面せざるをえない。カリキュラムの全てを英語で行っている小規模な大学で行われた本研究は、多読プログラム実施における最大の問題ともいえる学生の不適切な行為の実態と対策を考察したものである。学生への面接調査と教師自らの指導経験に基づき、不適切な行為を次の5つのタイプに分類した。(1)友人の助けを借りる、(2)実際に本を読む、あるいはレポートを完成させる代わりにネット上の情報を参照する、(3)すでに自らがよく知っていることについて読んだり書いたりする、(4)本を読む代わりに映画を見る、(5)その他。同様に、5種類の不正行為の対策を見つけ出すことができた。その結果、学生の不適切な行為を防止すると同時に、適切な対策の使用により学生にとっての多読経験をよりよいものにする可能性があることが明らかになった。

Extensive reading (ER) as a means of improving students' reading fluency has gained acceptance in language courses at secondary and tertiary levels in Japan. A number of studies have shown the benefits of ER in Japanese English as a

Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (O'Neill, 2012; Powell, 2005; Mason & Krashen, 1997). Despite these benefits, language teachers often struggle with implementing ER programs. One of the key problems in implementing and running a successful ER program is student academic dishonesty. According to Nuss (1988), "Academic dishonesty usually refers to forms of cheating and plagiarism which result in students giving or receiving unauthorized assistance in an academic exercise or receiving credit for work which is not their own" (p. 1). Students are academically dishonest for a number of reasons. These reasons can include the pressure of improving grade point averages (GPAs) (Jones, 2011); students' lack of understanding of plagiarism and/or cheating (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005; Thompson & Williams, 1995); cultural influences (Dryden, 1999; Thompson & Williams, 1995); and students' procrastination (Jones, 2011). Regardless of the reasons, language teachers must be vigilant in policing unethical practices among their students. This study, which is based on a series of student interviews, examines two points: (a) the types of student academic dishonesty typically found in ER assignments, and (b) how language teachers can prevent cases of academic dishonesty among their students and enhance the ER experience of students.

Study Context and Methodology

This study was conducted at a small English-medium university in Japan. The study participants were in the advanced reading classes in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program and were placed in one of the three reading classes. The methods under which the groups undertook ER differed, and this allowed for a wider range of contexts under which to examine the issues of academic dishonesty and its prevention. Two of the groups (n=30) engaged in paper-based ER, read paperback graded readers, and wrote book reports. The other group (n=14) used Xreading®, an online ER platform where students read graded readers and took comprehension quizzes entirely online (www.xreading.com).

On the last day of the semester, the study participants completed a survey concerning their perceptions and opinions regarding their semester-long ER experiences. Ten subjects (five from the paper-based ER group and five from the online ER group) volunteered for individual 30-minute follow-up interviews in Japanese. These were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to ascertain any trends. During the interviews, they were asked to explain their survey responses. They were also asked to report any incidents where their peers were “cheating” when completing book reports or online comprehension quizzes because the researchers had been informed of “cheating” incidents anecdotally. Before students engaged in ER practices, the teachers told them not to refer to outside sources, including Japanese translations of reading summaries, Wiki-based websites, and/or watching movies in lieu of reading stories. This was in addition to a directive to avoid copying someone else’s past reports and/or share answers to quizzes. Therefore, the researchers consider any actions mentioned above to be “cheating.”

The interview data was categorized into two types of responses: (a) cheating methods, and (b) strategies to cope with cheating methods in ER practice. This study examined two points: (a) the types of student academic dishonesty typically found in ER assignments, and (b) how language teachers can prevent cases of academic dishonesty among their students. These points are examined both in the case of students using paperbacks and writing book reports and also those using an online format for reading texts and taking assessments.

Reported Cheating Methods in ER Practice

The interview data regarding possible strategies that students might use to cheat were categorized into one of five types: (a) asking for a friend’s help; (b) referring to online resources in lieu of reading or completing a text; (c) reading and writing about topics that were already familiar to the student; (d) watching movies instead of reading; and (e) others.

Method 1: Asking for friends’ help

One of the most common cheating methods was asking for a friend’s help. The interviewees reported that there were cases where book reports were written by students by referring to someone else’s report or by listening to another person’s description of a graded reader. With regards to the use of Xreading®, there were incidents of sharing comprehension quiz answers or even completing quizzes for a friend.

Method 2: Referring to online resources

Another common method of cheating was using uncited online resources. Rather than actually reading a graded reader, some students googled a topic on the Internet to write a book report or answer Xreading® comprehension quiz questions.

Method 3: Reading and writing about familiar topics

An additional cheating method was reading and writing about familiar topics. One typical example was that a student would skip reading a graded reader about a well-known historical figure and would instead write a book report based on his/her knowledge of that historical figure gained through high school classes. Another method involved students answering Xreading® comprehension questions based on facts they had been taught at school without actually reading a graded reader online. Since the quizzes ask general information questions, it is not challenging to answer questions correctly without actually reading graded readers, according to the interviewees.

Method 4: Watching movies

Similarly, four interviewees reported watching movies instead of actually reading graded readers about stories upon which the films were based. There were also cases reported where students wrote book reports or answered Xreading® comprehension quizzes based on memories of movies they had previously seen. They did not even attempt to watch a new movie in order to do the assignment.

Method 5: Others

Other cheating strategies involved partially reading a book and using a timer. In the case of only reading parts of a book for writing a book report, some students read only the beginning and the end of the book or skimmed the boldfaced headings and a paragraph below each heading to gain an overall picture of the story. In case of the use of a timer, it was reported that students used a timer or stopwatch to monitor their reading time to turn to the next page on Xreading®, instead of actually reading through the text. Since Xreading® constantly keeps track of reading speed, it would be obvious if a user turned a page (clicked the button to move on to the following page) too quickly without actually reading it. Therefore, the use of a timer is a way to regulate movement to another page in order to pretend to have read a page on screen.

Strategies to Enhance the Benefits of ER Practice

The other aim of the present study is to share suggestions and strategies for improving ER practice in English classrooms. The suggestions were generated from both the student interviews and the classroom experiences of the researchers and are divided into five categories: (a) evaluation methods; (b) in-class activities; (c) length of the ER practice; (d) combining paper-based and on-line ER; and (e) other methodologies.

Strategy 1: Evaluation methods

The most common strategy suggested by the interviewees is related to how ER evaluation methods should be modified or improved. One suggested change is to use an extra credit system. For instance, after reading more than the required amount of text, students can be awarded extra points toward their final course grade. This method can raise their extrinsic motivation to read more.

Another suggestion is relevant to the structure of the book report template. Since each book report currently receives a simple pass (P) or a fail (F) grade, the quality of book reports is mostly irrelevant. However, awarding a grade of A, B, or C for each report may boost students' motivation to produce reports of higher quality. This motivation might contribute to more careful reading of the selected graded readers. In addition, the current book report template consists of a short summary and a reflection. Changing the format to ask more individualized questions would hinder a student from simply cutting and pasting. To illustrate, a new prompt could read: "Write a different ending to the story you have read" or "Write what would happen to the main character after the end of the story you have read."

The final suggestion in this category would be for instructors to keep digital or hard copy files of student book reports. Making it public knowledge that teachers have access to a centralized file of reports submitted in the past might discourage students from simply sharing their old book reports with other students and might discourage students from using other students' previously submitted reports.

Strategy 2: In-class activities

Interviewees suggested different in-class activities be used for higher motivation toward ER practice. One possible change involves a class activity of having the entire class, or groups of students, read the same book in order to more deeply discuss the book

content. Further, assigning the same book to the entire class might be beneficial because the teacher could teach certain reading or writing strategies specific to the book, including how to write a summary and how to guess word meanings in a given context by referring to a specific part of the same book. Another in-class activity which may facilitate better ER practice is to provide an opportunity for poster presentations. The pressure of presenting the book contents to a larger audience may encourage students to read more carefully.

Strategy 3: Length of the ER practice

Three study participants suggested that the time they engage in ER should be shorter. ER-related activities started to feel like a tiring routine and not a learning opportunity the longer the activity went on. One possible reason for this fatigue may be related to the fact that they became busier in other classes as the semester progressed. Several solutions may be to: (a) make the ER practice an intensive activity engaged in over a shorter duration of time; (b) have several distinct sessions of ER scattered throughout the semester; or (c) engage in several types of class activities over the duration of the ER program in order to keep the students engaged and interested.

Strategy 4: Combining paper-based and on-line ER

Another suggestion involved a combined use of Xreading® and a book report system. In order to maximize the possible advantages of Xreading® and the benefits of the book report assignment, students can use Xreading® for reading graded readers online and engaging in writing book reports. This way, instructors can monitor students' reading progress through Xreading®; students can read books conveniently on their mobile devices, and they can also improve their writing skills. One drawback to this approach is the additional burden put both on the instructor, who needs to read the book reports, and students. However, despite the drawbacks, this combined approach may be one of the most effective ways to prevent cheating.

Strategy 5: Other methodologies

One suggestion made by the researchers based on their classroom practice is to continually emphasize the importance and benefit of ER to the students engaged in the program. Doing so might encourage students to avoid cheating, as they might understand that the benefits of following through on their ER obligations will outweigh any discomfort

they encounter in reaching their ER goals. To have students aware of the benefits of ER is a good objective to begin with, but convincing them to fully buy into the program will also work to avoid any temptations toward cheating, as they would see cheating as something that would hurt their chances to improve their fluency.

Limitations and Implications

This study had some limitations in presenting its findings. For instance, the findings were based on interview data from a small number of students (N=10). A larger pool of interviewees might have provided larger numbers of cheating strategies and methods to counteract them. Additionally, as this was a small-scale study conducted in advanced reading classes in an EAP program at an English-medium university in Japan, it might not provide outcomes that could easily be applied to other language teaching settings. Thus, there is a need for further research to examine the application of the findings to different contexts.

Conclusion

This study examined the different types of academic dishonesty that have been active in an ER program at an English-medium university in Japan. The types of cheating undertaken by students were identified by the students themselves. Students also offered cogent suggestions to combat cheating by making changes to the ER classroom practice. These suggestions were supplemented by recommendations by the researchers based on their experiences in organizing and running ER programs.

The findings indicated that there were several tendencies toward cheating active in the ER program. These ranged from relying on the help of friends, using uncited online resources, choosing familiar books and topics, watching movies instead of reading the assigned books, and other techniques used to avoid doing the work of reading and comprehending the texts under review. These acts of academic dishonesty, the research indicated, could be countered or avoided through changes to classroom practice. These ranged from changing assessment strategies to adjusting in-class activities. Other suggestions were to change the length of the ER program or even mixing traditional paper-based ER with on-line ER formats.

Additionally, there was a suggestion to make students fully aware of the benefits of ER. If students are aware of the benefits that they can gain via the ER program, they might be ill-disposed to cheat.

Finally, the benefits of these suggestions extend beyond diminishing the cases of academic dishonesty in ER. They also will work to help enhance students' ER experiences. When these suggestions for classroom practice are adopted, two important concerns are addressed—firstly, action is taken to reduce or eliminate academic dishonesty and, secondly, students are granted a richer experience with ER.

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