Program Features to Nudge Students to Read More

Marcel Van Amelsvoort, Anna H. Isozaki, and Yasuko Yoshino

Juntendo University

This paper reports on best practices gleaned from an extensive reading (ER) program in a liberal arts department at a university in Japan, now in its third year (see Van Amelsvoort 2016 and 2017 for reports on the first two years). Since its inception, the program has deployed various tools to achieve more and richer engagement by students. These include ways of encouraging students to read in greater volume to meet product goals for the program (word counts) in order to see tangible improvements in reading speed and scores on standardized tests. At the same time, the program has attempted to maintain a focus on process goals of facilitating rich interactive experiences with both texts and other students, and fostering enjoyment of reading in a foreign language. This article shares best practices learned through literature reviews and trial implementations in this program. In particular, this article focuses on how process goals can be achieved by providing activities that focus on content, including Book Talks, a system of presentations and discussions in class about books, and Book Clubs, an extracurricular system for scaffolding students who are interested in attempting ungraded books, by making use of audiobooks, movie adaptations, group discussions, and manga notebooks.

Additive ER, a system where students do extensive reading outside of class (Robb & Kano 2013), is popular in universities and colleges in Japan because of its proven general language learning benefits such as improved vocabulary, speaking, writing, and listening skills (Waring, 2009) and effectiveness in increasing reading confidence and decreasing reading anxiety (Yoshida, 2016). Good reading speed and comprehension are required to demonstrate language proficiency on the most widely used standardized tests. Additive ER can be a way of developing reading fluency and speed in preparation for these tests, but students need to read vast quantities of text to see results, with research showing reading speed increases after 200,000 words (Beglar & Hunt, 2014) and that TOEIC test score improvements begin to appear after more than 300,000 words (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Nishizawa and Yoshioka, 2016).

This article summarizes the best practices gleaned from the missteps and successes of an ER program now in its third year in an international liberal arts department at a private university in Tokyo. In order to address problems with engagement and non-compliance, the program has undergone several significant reforms informed by literature reviews (see Van Amelsvoort, 2016, 2017). The current program

requires all 120 students in the cohort to read 100,000 words per term, for two years, and 60,000 each summer and spring break between years, leading to a total of 520,000 words over two academic years. The program's product goals of word counts, reading speed increases, and improved scores on standardized tests are in tandem with process goals of nurturing the enjoyment of reading in general, and reading in a foreign language in particular, something that has the power to be a transformative experience (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006). In the first year of the program when ER was optional, few students attempted it at all; changes made in the subsequent two years have greatly facilitated engagement (Van Amelsvoort, 2016, 2017). However, while the program has become better at achieving product goals, the teachers have had doubts about the process goals, which seemed to be more challenging to attain. This paper will share recent activities that look promising.

Addressing Biases and Unrealistic Expectations

Introduction

In setting up an ER program, it is important to be realistic about student needs and attitudes. Some students may not easily accept the idea that reading easy books can lead to proficiency gains. One also must consider how to achieve demonstrable outcomes that can help the administration see a return on investment.

Don't assume students will like reading (in English)

Although Japan is highly literate, many university students rarely read in their L1. According to a February 2017 survey by the Asahi Newspaper in Japan, 50% of university student respondents claimed that they "never" read books, and had read books for 0 minutes the previous year (Asahi News, 2017). Even if the motivation to pick up a book in their L2 is there, reading in a foreign language is certainly challenging, requiring more mental effort to process, which can contribute to making the experience more tiring and less enjoyable (Koda, 2007; Mori, 2015). In addition, students may find the graded readers available in a program to be less engaging and enjoyable than teachers hope. This may be the result of unfortunate choices by the program coordinator who purchases the books or the student who makes a selection, but sometimes it is because of the quality of the books themselves.

Don't assume students will know how to do ER

ER is still not all that common in junior and senior high schools in Japan. Mikami (2016), in a survey of his university classes, found that none of his students had taken part in an ER program previously. A large number of our students struggle to understand and accept the concept that reading "easy" books can lead to proficiency improvements and test improvements, probably because it runs counter to their experience to date.

Don't assume students will read often or regularly, even if they want to

University students in Japan struggle to meet a variety of demands on their time, including large class loads, club activities, part-time jobs, and screen time. In-department surveys have shown that our students spend an average of 13 hours per week working at part time jobs. They also use their smartphones for an average of 4 hours per day.

Don't assume students will notice proficiency improvements from ER

The benefits of ER accrue so slowly that improvements are rarely perceptible to the learners themselves (Chang & Renandya, 2017). After the initial accomplishment of finishing one complete book in English, dozens more must be waded through before reading speeds or standardized test scores begin to improve, making it a challenge to sustain motivation.

Program Features to Facilitate Sustained Engagement

Introduction

Based on our literature reviews and experience, the following seem to be important features in a program, and facilitate meeting product goals.

Institutional Implementation

For an ER program to succeed at engaging a large number of students for an extended period of time, it should be built into the language education program as a whole. That is, it should appear to students as a core learning activity that is essential for successful language acquisition. If given higher profile in an institution, students are more likely to see ER as something they ought to do (Dörnyei, 2009; Pigott, 2011). Students in Japan often display more of what Yashima (2014) calls autonomous dependency, whereby they look to the institution and teachers they trust for guidance on what they should do. Making ER mandatory for all students in a program, mentioning it during program-wide orientation sessions, devoting time at the beginning of term for introduction and onboarding (Van Amelsvoort, 2016), and placing leaderboards in prime public locations all seem to improve engagement.

Grades

Grades help drive engagement in the short run, giving students a strong reason to make some effort, and this extrinsic motivation hopefully can help to develop intrinsic motivation (Gagne & Deci, 2005). ER now comprises 10% of our students' grades for the core English courses. In the first year of the program when ER was optional, 29% of the students chose not to read at all and as many as 57% of the students read too little to see any benefits, meaning that at least 86% of our students were not benefiting from our ER program (Van Amelsvoort, 2016). The subsequent year, when the ER program was compulsory and represented 10% of the total course grade, engagement improved, with 70% clearing the target word count. Tracking and sharing any progress publicly can help to encourage better engagement (Burke et al., 2011). Our teachers have reported that reading record sharing and leaderboard viewing have helped improve word count totals.

Clear Goals

Students perform better when there are clear, manageable targets because it is easier for them to see how good habitual behaviors help them meet those targets, eventually leading to better final outcomes (Fryer, 2011). As ER goals are necessarily large and daunting, it is important to set smaller milestone targets. Our term targets are broken down into four interim word counts spaced throughout the term. In addition, we give students one grade point for every 10,000 words they read, so they can see their progress clearly in grade points.

Ease of Access

A key concept in usability design is to remove any hindrances to smooth engagement (McMurry, Tanner, & Anderson, 2010). Placing books in distant libraries can add

extra hurdles and negatively affect engagement. Classroom libraries (Miller & Moss, 2013) or book carts brought to class have been found to greatly increase engagement (Yoshida, 2014; Imrie, 2017). In our program, books are placed in a central learning center in the building where students have their classes. We also purchase subscriptions for all students on XReading (xreading.com), an online extensive reading library and learning management site that is accessible via students' devices.

Teacher Involvement

In our experience, perhaps the most important feature in the success of an ER program in Japan is teacher involvement. The power of the teacher as an involved coach, taking advantage of students' autonomous dependency (Yashima, 2014) to foster good ER reading habits and maintain engagement cannot be overstated. By monitoring students, engaging them in mini conferences (short, impromptu conversations about the content or level of the books they're reading) in class, and suggesting titles based on observations, teachers have a vital role to play in ensuring that the ER reading experience becomes positive and meaningful (Miller & Moss, 2013). Teachers can also make regular use of graded readers read as homework for in-class activities, for example read and retell speaking fluency activities or thematic discussions based on a shared reader. Book Talks and Book Clubs, discussed later in this paper, are more structured and deeper implementations of this approach.

Careful Monitoring

The large amount of reading needed to achieve program goals prompts some students to cheat, usually by falsely claiming to have read books that they haven't. Written book reports or electronic tests such as those on the XReading system or MReader system add an unpleasant but necessary layer of accountability to the ER experience. However, all of these can be subject to cheating. In addition to setting clear and attainable goals, careful monitoring by involved, passionate teachers seems to be the best approach to reducing cheating. In the third year of the program, students were encouraged to read more on XReading rather than paper books, and teachers were encouraged to closely track the progress of their classes. This gave teachers better tools for monitoring students' progress, and though we saw a drop in the number of students who cleared the 100,000 word goal for the first term in the third year (70 students out of 123 in 2017, versus 90 students out of 119 in 2016), we believe this more accurately represents how much our students were truly reading.

Social Engagement Features to Provide a Richer Supportive Experience

Introduction

As mentioned above, an effective ER program has not only product goals, but also process goals. Through engagement with the content of books and sharing ideas, it is hoped that students can have a deeper, richer experience and be nurtured in the enjoyment of reading in a foreign language, something that has the power to be a transformative experience for students (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006). As we have seen however, the pressure to read a large volume of text, the limited amount of classroom time, and variations in student attitudes toward reading in general and L2 reading in particular, make it challenging to achieve process goals. This section will focus on two activities that can help toward process goals: Book Talks and Book Clubs.

Book Talk

Although the core activity for Book Talks is student presentations on books they've read, it is better to think of them as a comprehensive classroom-based approach to changing student attitudes toward reading, with explanations, rationale, and training for students in extensive reading.

Primarily, each week two students come to the front one after the other and give a short presentation about a graded reader they've read recently. They write the title and some keywords about the story, characters, or themes of the book on the board. They then summarize and share their opinions about the books. For the first few weeks, the teacher helps by providing a template to use for the presentations. Students listening to the presentations are then given the opportunity to ask questions. Following the presentations, students take turns in pairs talking about graded readers they've read recently. After a few minutes, they change partners and do it again. The instructor circulates around the class, joining pairs and engaging students in mini conferences. This system helps students find good books and helps the teacher to better understand the types of books and levels students are reading. In 2017, a survey of two classes, one that had done Book Talk presentations and one that had only received an orientation to ER, showed that a much larger percentage of students had come to like reading in the class that had Book Talks (90%) compared to the class in which it was not done (59%). Comments from students reinforced this result. Students wrote that it was difficult to summarize and deliver the presentations, but they appreciated the opportunity to practice doing presentations and found some books they wanted to read through the recommendations of other students. Some comments also mentioned that talking about books deepened their understanding of them, and that verbalizing and listening to reactions to books helped them to better communicate with and understand their classmates (Yoshino & Isozaki, 2017).

Book Clubs

Book Clubs are an extracurricular activity that allow more proficient students with an interest in attempting an ungraded book some support and resources to better enable them to do so. Evidence in many learning situations is building for peer-led discussions of reading in various forms, and experts are recommending time on these tasks as helpful and motivating (Green, 2005; LeBlanc, 2015; Prowse, 2002; Shelton-Strong, 2012; Waring, 2014).

Also, bimodal input – reading and listening simultaneously under appropriate conditions for the learners' present levels – can improve vocabulary and grammar use, listening and reading comprehension, reading speeds, and also enjoyment (Chang & Millett, 2014, 2015; Cheetham, 2018; Cho & Reinders, 2013; Kartal & Simsek, 2017; Woodall, 2010). Reading while listening to an audiobook, or simply listening, can be a relaxing, meaningful and effective way to spend time learning (Onoda, 2012; McNabb, 2013; Prowse, 2002; Reinders & Cho, 2010).

Scholarship has also been growing regarding peer-led reading groups for both first and second language reading and discussions (Daniels, 2006; Duncan, 2009). Creative and reflective writing, dialogues, or visualization by drawing and making memos of a book's storyline can increase participation and help with consolidating and deepening consideration of one's reading (Bowers-Campbell, 2011; Daniels, 2006; Klages, Pate & Conforti, 2007; Stephens, 2017). "Manga notebooks" developed by Yumitani (2015)

can be particularly effective in facilitating small-group discussion. These are small memo books in which students can sketch out scenes which have struck them, save quotes they like, and make notes of questions to bring up with the group.

In our program, our mostly first language Japanese students have widely varying English reading skill levels and we wanted to offer opportunities for those who might enjoy the satisfaction of a full-length book in a sustained project, but would not necessarily be able to find quality books at manageable levels on their own. Most of our students have not read unabridged English books before (Stephens, 2017). The social group support of a book club can potentially help them start and continue. Other support, for example watching movie adaptations of books, can also be used.

We chose to offer *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom because the length is quite manageable, as is the content, and it has been consistently popular with student readers. Students set their own assigned sections – tracks to listen to and pages to read in the week between meetings – with the goal of finishing the book while balancing their other work during the semester in mind.

The role of the instructor in our lunchtime sessions has been more as a member and resource person (as modeled in Nishino, 2007, and suggested by Shelton-Strong, 2012) than as a leader or a teacher. To emphasize students' autonomy, the ownership of the meetings rests with the student members as they share their notebooks, discussion questions or comments, and favorite lines with each other. Naturally, cultural reference questions arise. The instructor can contribute information, whether directly with a quick definition, or

more often, in guiding their development of searching skills to help them effectively access "tertiary intelligence" now available to them (Cheetham, 2018).

On completion of the book and meetings, the book club members can collect extra credit by writing short responses to discussion questions. Final survey results about the book club meetings have been positive: with almost all members writing that they liked the book and the book club, they would listen to an audiobook again, their reading and their listening had improved, and vocabulary had increased.

A Final Word

Teachers and administrators have a considerable number of tools available to help nudge students to meet product and process goals for an ER program. In addition to structuring a program to get students to read more, however, it is important to employ activities that help develop the process goals we have for our students, so that they have a rich and meaningful experience interacting with the ideas in texts and their classmates, and come to see reading in a foreign language as something they find useful, meaningful, and perhaps even enjoyable.

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