Starting a University-Wide English Extensive Reading Program: Working Together

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This paper provides an account of an English extensive reading project that was set up at a medium-sized provincial Japanese university by a working group consisting of library staff, Learning Support Center staff, and English teaching faculty. The primary focus is the story of the project, including the perspectives of the three sides of this partnership, the outcomes or achievements of the project, and the lessons learned through the first months of undertaking this extensive reading project. Recommendations relate to administrative and interpersonal issues encountered through the project, project timing, the benefits of iterations within the year of the project, and the need for greater student and student group involvement in planning extensive reading workshops and other activities as part of the project.

This is the story of a university-wide extensive reading program for English learners, set up at a medium-sized provincial Japanese university in 2017 and co-managed by one English Department professor, one English tutor from the university's Learning Support Center (LSC), and one librarian from the university library. During this academic year, at Hiroshima Shudo University two one-month extensive reading campaigns and one six-month campaign were planned, along with three workshops for students, various types of information and promotion to the students and to the approximately 60 full- and part-time teachers of English classes at the university, and a very attractive display in the graded reader area of the university library. All this may sound like a successful project, and in many ways it has achieved its objectives so far, but through setting up the

program and planning the various events, there were many problems, mistakes, and misunderstandings observed that risked putting the whole program in jeopardy.

The purpose of this paper is to tell the story of this project, and in doing so to share the lessons learned so far through the project. After a brief review of accounts of the setting up of similar ventures, we will report the way in which the project has progressed from the first conversations up to the latest workshops. The paper will also include a summarizing report from each of the three partners in the project before concluding with the various lessons we have learned through this project, lessons that we hope will be of use to others considering taking on a similar extensive reading project.

Related Studies

Over the past two or three decades, there have been many, and various, projects relating to extensive reading all over the world. Many of these have been concerned

with the challenge of making available reading matter and a place to read: to setting up a class or school library of graded readers (Cliffe, 1990, p. 29); to making a comfortable reading space (Fritze & Rowan, 2005, p. 28); or setting up an area for English reading material in the library (Kitao & Shimatani, 1988, pp. 47-49). Concerning the "working together" side of setting up of a university-wide project, if we look beyond extensive reading, comparable university-wide projects may be found for self-access learning or social learning spaces. Okayama University's L-café was set up to be a place that would be managed by teaching faculty and administrative staff working together (Tahara, 2016, pp. 14-20), but the facility was conceived, planned, and established by senior faculty responsible for university management. In the case of the running a self-access language learning centre, Cooker (2010, p.7) recommends student involvement, but does not go into detail about the people involved in setting up the self-access learning center at Kanda University of International Studies: we are told that a proposal was drafted, submitted, and accepted; funding was allocated; and space was provided.

Project Purpose and Administration

In the academic context reported here, there were already well over 4,000 English graded readers available for students to borrow or read in at least two comfortable places on the campus: the university library and the social learning space named the iCafe. The project was not concerned with getting more books or making a reading space. Rather, the challenge has been that described by Hill: "The books are there waiting to be used. The students are there waiting to read them. The work of bringing them together is very worthwhile." (1997, p. 20) The project has been focused on extensive reading

campaigns: two one-month campaigns and one six-month campaign. The reason for this focus was to encourage the students to read as much as they could. As Day and Bamford explain, "This is the "extensive" of extensive reading, made possible by the previous principles. The most critical element in learning to read is the amount of time spent actually reading." (2002, p. 103) Although extensive reading, including sustained silent reading in class, is a part of many of the English classes, class-time reading could not be described as extensive. In common with a project reported ten years previously (Tada, Visgatis & Masaki, 2007, pp. 127-139), also in Japan, it was felt that short-term campaigns might give students a taste for extensive reading: this could increase individual motivation and amounts of reading taking place, and become a long-term habit.

The beginning of the project was a conversation in November, 2016, between an English Department professor and a tutor in the university's LSC. After agreeing that some kind of extensive reading project would be worth conducting at the university, the LSC tutor spoke with a colleague in the university library. With knowledge of a previous, library-led, extensive reading campaign, the librarian's response was positive, as was that of his colleagues. LSC management also gave their consent, as did the Department of English, English Group, and the Global Education Department. The library then hosted a number of working group planning meetings between January and March, attended by full-time faculty from the three groups, a part-time teacher, and staff from the library and from the LSC.

Suddenly, towards the end of March, it was announced that two of the supportive library staff members would be transferred to other parts of the university. When the

next meeting was held, in early April, there was no longer a general feeling of support, and the project plans were stalled at this point. Although we had been planning to conduct our first one-month extensive reading campaign in May, there was no further word from the library until the end of the April. We were then told that it may be possible to proceed, and another meeting was held. Again, there was not much feeling of support, but we were given permission to prepare for a one-month extensive reading campaign, to be held in June, another in October, and a six-month "marathon" from June to December. Following the campaign in June, a "hanseikai" reflection meeting was held, in which we reported the results of the campaign, and apologized for all that we had done wrong or failed to do. Since then, the working group is working better as a team.

Together with the extensive reading campaigns, three extensive reading workshops were held for students. Information, in English and Japanese, was distributed to around 60 full- and part-time teachers to explain both about extensive reading itself and about the campaigns. The campaigns were promoted widely, by the library and the LSC, and via teachers, electronic signage and posters, and an attractive display in the library.

Outcomes

As we consider outcomes from the project so far, we begin by reporting, and considering, data from the first of the one-month reading campaigns held during the year. We also report participation in extensive reading workshops for students. We then itemize less quantifiable outcomes, including increased awareness of extensive reading among students and faculty, insights gained through the project, and

changes made both to the campaigns and to teaching made possible by these insights.

The most concrete outcome of the study is the number of participants who joined the extensive reading campaigns and the amount of extensive reading that they managed during the designated time period. Data were only available for one of the one-month campaigns. In total, 286 students participated, with 283 participating as part of their classes, and only three joining as individual participants. Of the 286 students, 107 belonged to the Department of English, with the remaining 179 students of other departments or faculties. The top ten readers read around 60,000 words during the month, with the majority of participants only reading between 5,000 and 10,000 words: equivalent to between 150 to 300 words a day. Also somewhat disappointingly, apart from students in 1st year classes, no Department of English students took part in the campaign.

At the time of writing, three extensive reading workshops for students have been held, led by an English Department professor or by a tutor from the LSC. For the first two workshops, there were very low participation numbers, but 15 students joined the latest of the workshops, as did three English teachers.

A further worthwhile outcome is that awareness of extensive reading has increased among both teachers and students at the university, as has knowledge about the campaigns held over the year. All teachers of English at the university received introductory explanations about the nature and purpose of extensive reading. Although it is difficult to gauge how many students may have been given information by their teachers, many will now be more aware of extensive reading thanks to handouts,

displays and other publicity for the campaigns.

Finally, but very importantly, the first one-month campaign and the workshops have provided valuable insights into how to proceed with extensive reading at the university. For example, the generally low reading rate among first-year English Department students appears to have been a result of the "It's up to you" policy of most teachers on the main English course for first year students: encouraging extensive reading and learner autonomy at the same time. Unfortunately, "up to me" was very often interpreted as "I don't have to read outside class", with the result that many students did not engage in a level of reading that could be called extensive. In response to this, for the second semester, 15% of the students' grade for one course has been tied to their extensive reading, and many have responded positively to this change. For the workshops, one major factor for the success of the third workshop may be ascribed to the cooperation of the university's English Speaking Society; next year, we will work to plan these events in cooperation with this and other student associations.

Three perspectives

Katsuya Koresawa, LSC

First and foremost, the extensive reading project is a good educational opportunity for students. One of our primary purposes is to encourage learner autonomy outside of the classroom, so running this project meets this goal. Also, since our resources are limited, it is important to work together with teachers and library staff in order to create something new by cooperating together. The LSC can contribute to planning the project, collecting and checking records, hosting committee meetings, and managing workshops as well as award ceremonies.

However, LSC staff, together with library staff, realized our limitations in terms of direct contact with students as compared to the university's teaching faculty.

All of the work involved in this project has taken much more time than we expected, because we largely started from scratch, and the experience has been disappointing in some way. However, one of positive outcomes we found is that the more hurdles we have encountered, the more we unite. Therefore, for our future project, first we need to simplify complicated rules; and second to reduce the workload. Finally, we need to provide earlier notification and explanation about the extensive reading campaign guidelines to teachers, who in turn could encourage greater numbers of students to participate in the project.

Naoya Kadowaki, University Library

Although the Library had held an English Extensive Reading campaign two years before, we doubted the educational benefits since library staff could not give students practical English reading advice. However, in this new extensive reading project we would be working with faculty members and the LSC. This way, together, we could give specific guidance to readers. Since we share the workload with them, we are able to focus on our role of supplying reading materials, printing comments sheets, and accepting word number slips as the Library opens longer than other facilities. Furthermore, we could increase the availability of electronic books for smartphone and tablet users through this campaign. Our future tasks are to enrich reading instructions such as preparation for a graded reader "pathfinder" guide to finding suitable books, whether paper or e-books, and to provide more guidance for e-books available from the library via QR codes.

Jim Ronald, Department of English

The main reason for proposing this project was to increase the number of students who appreciate the value of extensive reading, and actually do it. A large part of this primary objective has been to inform teachers of English classes about extensive reading, and the various campaigns, so that they may consider including extensive reading in their classes in some way, and encourage their students to read, and to take part in the campaigns. The "working together" aspect was a necessary part of this project. Although the campaigns were focused on the university library, a large part of their success depended on the extent to which communication about extensive reading and the specific campaigns could be conveyed to the teachers and students of English at the university, in both English and Japanese. This requirement meant that the project co-managers had to learn more about the subject, and had to work together to convey this information to their colleagues in the library or LSC, and to teachers of English. While working together was an unavoidable necessity for the running of the project, in fact it has been one of its most important aspects for those involved: providing mutual support, guidance, and enjoyment for the learning journey that this project has been for each of us.

The campaigns have also had unexpected benefits for teachers with in-class extensive reading as part of their syllabus. These include providing data that clearly demonstrated the relatively low volume of reading undertaken by the majority of students outside of class. They also showed how few students beyond first year classes seemed to be actively doing extensive reading, or at least both reading and interested in joining the campaigns. Two further issues that the campaigns have highlighted are the need to find a way to show appreciation for the

efforts of less proficient students, and the importance of making sure that reading records completed by students are accurate and trustworthy. All of these issues have been addressed or taken on board for the second semester of the campaign, and as we look forward to its second year. For one major course for English majors, extensive reading now accounts for a proportion of student grades: it is no longer just "up to you". A department-wide second year course has also introduced extensive reading as an element of the course, and students have been actively supported in joining the campaign. For the lower level learners of English, there is now a category in the campaigns of numbers of books read, as well as word count, with this category is also included in the forthcoming award ceremony. Finally, the use of an online reading learning management system is being considered as one way to increase reading, and to increase the reliability of student reading records.

Together, these three perspectives display a common goal of enabling a greater number of students to read more in English. They also reflect a shared appreciation of the benefits of working together to achieve this goal: through promotion, guidance, and provision of resources. As we proceed, we look forward to including an important fourth perspective: that of students themselves, and not just as readers.

Recommendations

Through the project reported above, many problems were encountered, and many of these could have been avoided with foresight or suitable advice. There were also a number of decisions made that turned out to have been correct. The list of recommendations below are the result of these opposing types of experience, presented

here in the hope that future similar projects may benefit from these experiences.

- Start "high" – via academic heads of the different relevant parts of the university. (For this project, the starting point was "people we knew", not directors or managers. This meant that we did not have the seal of official approval, which could have resulted in more willing compliance from other staff.)

- Seek advice from people who know. (A similar library-initiated project had been conducted a couple of years previously. Some of those involved could have been contacted and would have been a source of invaluable advice.)

- Start talking early, get agreement early, and finalize major points before April. (Although we had made considerable progress up to the end of March, major decisions had not been agreed on. Staff changes meant that supportive staff were transferred elsewhere. In addition, during April, the library staff were too busy to have time for this project.)

- Involve students from early on. ESS? English camp? Maybe even an ER club? (Although there was interest expressed by a group of students early on, student involvement in the project other than as "consumers" was not sought until the university's ESS helped promote our final workshop.)

- Accept the bureaucracy – it's there! (As an official project, every stage had to be carefully prepared, documented, and approved: rather than be irritated, we needed an attitude of appreciation.)

- Work with people you get on with. (From the beginning, the three project co-managers (and authors of this paper) have worked together well, appreciated each other's work and enjoyed each other's company. This has helped us overcome many challenges.)

- Aim to get on with people you work with! (At times, some working group members may seem to be unnecessarily critical or obstructive. Rather than react negatively, our job is to win them over.)

- Communicate better – with everyone involved! (At times, it is tempting to just go ahead without sharing plans, getting agreement, apologizing where necessary. Taking the time to communicate better by whatever means is time well spent.)

- Do the campaign twice: plan – do – review – plan – do again! (With one-month reading campaigns conducted twice in one year, it was possible to apply what was learned from the administration of the first campaign to the second one.)

Finally, although in many ways this university-wide extensive campaign has been successful, and will be continued for at least one more year, it has involved the dedication of many hours by a large number of people. We are planning to continue with this project, and believe that it has been worthwhile. It is worth remembering, however, that smaller scale projects, such as for an individual class, a course shared by a few teachers, or a department in a university, may be a better way to proceed. These would encounter less bureaucracy, more freedom to make decisions about how to conduct the project, possibly easier access to any funds required for the project, and an opportunity to devote more attention and

resources to a specific group of language learners.

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