

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Peer teaching in skills-based reading courses

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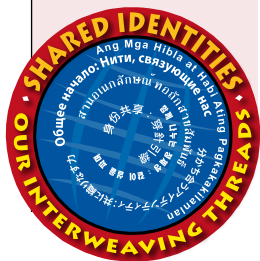
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Some academic skilled-based reading courses at universities have content and materials which do not appeal to the students. Furthermore, students often process the teacher-set materials in a shallow and mechanical way leading to non-salient learning. This article explains how peer teaching by university students in small groups can be incorporated into skills-based reading courses, and in the process, help deepen the learning experience, raise the students' motivation, and broaden the content area beyond the narrow focus of most university textbooks. By allowing the students to choose their own reading text and develop their own materials, it adds impact to the course content and makes the learning process more student-centred. The article concludes with guidelines for establishing peer-teaching groups and a discussion of survey results showing how students have evaluated this component of the reading course.

大学におけるいくつかの専門的な技術を要する読解コースでは生徒達があまり興味を示さない内容や題材がしばしば含まれる。さらに生徒達は講師が準備した題材を浅く、また重要で無いかのように機械的にこなすだけの学習をしている。この論説はどれだけ大学生による少人数でのグループリーダー学習が技術を要する読解コースに組み込まれ得るかを説いている。またその過程で学習経験を深め、学生達の意欲を高め、多くの大学教材に見られる選択肢の限られた内容範囲を超えそれらの域を拡大するかも説いている。

学生達自身が読む教材を選択し、題材を展開する事によりコースの内容にインパクトを出せ、より学生を中心とした学習過程ができる。この論説はグループリーダー学習を確立させるためのガイドラインであり、学生によるこのコース構成の評価結果をまとめた議論となっている。

Reading comprehension and skills-based courses are usually an integral part of the English curricula in Japanese universities, but do these teacher-centred courses taught in the traditional manner really deliver the content in a way that is effective and motivating for the students? Observation of our students' reactions while working through the activities in the reading skills-based



textbooks indicates there is a need to supplement the content to make them more engaging for the students. Dornyei (2001) stressed the need to make our curriculum relevant to our students. Otherwise, they would not be “motivated to learn unless they regard the material that they are taught as worth learning” (Dornyei 2001, p.126). Whilst the course textbooks are effective at presenting and offering practice opportunities for developing reading skills, it is felt that the topics and sample texts used to practice these skills are somewhat outside the sphere of high-interest topics and issues for our students. As a result, the materials lacked sufficient impact to engage the students’ attention and motivation to allow them to process the target language to a deeper level (Tomlinson, 1998). Based on previous experience in reading classes this was one area which the teachers worked on addressing prior to the commencement of the academic year.

Teaching context

The College of Information Science and Engineering (CISE) has an integrated English curriculum. First year students take three English courses each semester. One of the three courses is an academic reading and writing course. The focus of this course is predominately on developing academic reading skills in English that prepare our students to take second year information technology and computer science lectures conducted entirely in English by non-Japanese lecturers. Classes are streamed and their TOEIC scores are mainly in the 350 to 450 range. The students are considered to be intermediate level by the English Department in the CISE.

Peer teaching

It was felt by the teachers involved in the reading courses that additional materials and a supplemental teaching approach were needed to augment the progress made in developing the students’ reading skills. It was decided to implement peer teaching sessions in small groups every two weeks where the student-teacher of the group selects and presents an article of their choosing. There are some advantages to using peer teaching. According to Edgar’s Cone of Learning (Edgar, 1969, as cited in Jacobs, Hurley, & Unite, 2008), if learners’ involvement in the learning process includes both receiving information and active participation such as giving a talk or demonstrating to others, the learning will be deeper and recall better. Other researchers have also pointed out that the preparation and rehearsal needed to teach something to others help to make the content more salient (Johnson, Johnson, & Holec, 2002, as cited in McCafferty, 2006), that, moreover, students can learn as much from their peers as they can from their teachers (Reid 1993, as cited in McCafferty, 2006), and that sometimes students can explain the material in ways that help their peers to understand it better (Webb & Farivar 1994, as cited in McCafferty, 2006). Finally, peer teaching and peer learning can lead to increased motivation, more active participation, greater in-depth understanding of language in use, and more opportunities to practice skills learnt in other class sessions (Assinder, 1991).

Implementing peer-teaching

Supplementing a skills-based textbook posed certain challenges for the instructors. Aspects of this process were considered potentially problematic. Large classes

with between 32 to 36 students presented some classroom management issues, such as group formation of the groups, and what to do should the designated group teacher be absent on the day of presenting their article and worksheet. At the same time, a new style of learning and peer teaching for the participants required clear and concise instructions, modeling of each step, and language support. The mechanics of the peer teaching activity used a substantial amount of classroom time in its early stages (Appendix 2).

The mechanics of implementing this peer teaching approach are twofold. There is a pre-activity teacher-centered element, followed by student-centered participation in the peer-teaching sessions. In the pre-activity stage, students were given some modeling of appropriate and effective materials. This included guidance with high-interest topic areas. The students were also shown completed sample worksheets. Modeling included an article presentation by the instructor. The students were given clear guidelines on appropriate materials and scaffolding for the language exercises on the worksheet (Appendix 1). Students were formed in study groups of their own choosing consisting of between five to six students per group. The order of presenters was also decided by the students, often by employing a simple *janken* (rock/scissors/paper). Designated students selected appropriate articles and completed the worksheets as a homework assignment. The teachers collected the assignments and copied them, checking the accuracy of the worksheets and appropriate text selection. This completed the pre-activity process.

The class activity was conducted in the aforementioned study groups. This allowed the peer teacher to facilitate

Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) (Loucky, 2005). This particular strategy enables students to actively contribute to group activities. First of all, the peer teacher explained the reasons why they had chosen their particular article. In explaining this, the peer teacher is involved in “Reciprocal Teaching,” becoming the teacher or group discussion leader (Loucky, 2005). This “ownership” of the materials is salient in the CSR process, in order to promote engagement with the materials in a deeper way. Furthermore, Craik and Lockhart’s (1972, as cited in McCafferty, 2006) depth of process concept says that the deeper the thinking process is engaged, the more likely something will be understood and remembered. In developing this reciprocal teaching, the students can learn from each other and lower student anxiety (Gonen, 2007).

The collaborative nature of this process is a strong theme throughout the reading class. The scaffolding of the worksheet gives the students more confidence in preparing to read the article. A vocabulary development activity enables the participants to study key vocabulary from the article chosen by the peer teacher. The worksheet also requires the group leader to outline key/main points from the article. The emphasis on discourse structure and vocabulary knowledge supports other reading fluency components (Grabe, 1991). Discourse structure requires more guidance and support in the pre-activity stage, to enable students to accurately identify the main points, and later to summarize or make an outline of them. Practice sessions in learning how to identify key points and summarize a text are provided in the weeks prior to the commencement of the peer teaching sessions.

An awareness of how texts are organized is seen as an important part of a reader's overall comprehension ability (Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002). The reading skills aspect of the class can help the students to grasp patterns of organizations and outlines. Another strategy to assist with this process is to encourage the students to ask themselves questions in pre-reading and answer them afterwards. Furthermore, identifying patterns such as cause-effect, listing and time/order patterns can be helpful. Jiang and Grabe (2007) discuss the use of Graphic Organizers to facilitate an understanding of discourse structures as an effective way to understand key/main points. The key vocabulary and key points activities lead the group toward the actual reading.

Turn taking in reading aloud the article is a good division of labor. This enables the instructor to listen and support pronunciation and other reading related difficulties students may have. An appropriate article should have ten to fifteen short paragraphs. The peer teacher then asks the learning group to answer some comprehension questions. These have been prepared in advance by the group leader as part of the worksheet homework. To identify the correct answers, the students employ skimming and scanning skills, which they have learnt and practiced in other components of the reading course. The worksheet has broken down the article into more manageable parts, thereby, helping the group to feel more confident in each segment of the activity.

The final part of this process is a short discussion and extension activity. Johnson and Johnson (2004, as cited in Loucky, 2005) suggest strategies that improve learners' comprehension and critical thinking skills include post-reading activities and strategies that help learners' better

review, analyze, reflect and respond to selections they have made. The collaborative manner of this class style can enhance the discussion work at the end. The students discuss the topic(s) and engage with the materials in a salient context.

The peer teaching section of the reading course was allocated 10% of the overall course assessment. This enabled the students to understand the significance of the activity, whilst at the same time, not placing too much emphasis on it. In assessing the articles and completed worksheets, the criteria involved a number of aspects. The appropriateness (length/difficulty/content) of the article was assessed and given a score out of four. The completion and accuracy of the worksheet were also evaluated and also given a score out of four. Finally, two points was awarded for the actual peer teaching and rated subjectively based on how much English was used in conducting the peer teaching session. The scores averaged about 80% as this was felt to reflect the effort students put into the activity.

Survey results

At the end of the first semester, the students were given the opportunity to evaluate the peer teaching component of the reading course and provide the teachers with feedback. The data could also support or reject the underlying pedagogical and learning assumptions for incorporating peer teaching in a reading skills course. In order to obtain students' feedback, a questionnaire was administered. It consists of 12 statements which the students rate according to a 5-point Likert Scale, with "1" for strongly disagree to "5" for strongly agree. Two open-ended questions followed the Likert scale questions

in order to gather additional data which may not be covered by the first 12 items. Incompleted questionnaires were not included in the sample data.

The results were analysed by first calculating the means for each of the Likert-scale items as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Mean scores of the 12 five-point Likert scale questions in the survey

Average score for each item based on a 5-point Likert scale. n=219	
1. I like to be able to choose my own topics to study in an English class.	3.6
2. It is easier for me to remember the meanings of new words that I have taught to other students in my group.	2.8
3. I want to do the article presentation again.	2.9
4. Doing the article presentation helped me to learn more new words.	3.4
5. Doing the article presentation helped me to read faster.	3.2
6. The topics in the textbook were more interesting than the topics in the article presentations.	2.7
7. I felt more confident doing the article presentation in small groups than giving a Power Point presentation to the whole class.	3.2
8. I can remember the content from my chosen article more than I can the reading sections from the textbook.	3.4
9. The teacher should always choose the materials and topics we study.	2.7
10. Making the article worksheet lets me practice some of the reading skills I learnt in class.	3.6
11. When I did another student's article worksheet, I felt I needed more time to prepare for the discussion part.	3.1
12. Teaching something to others is a good experience for me.	3.8

Averaging the individual scores over a sample size of 219 responses meant that the majority of the average scores tend towards a medium of three. In a 5-point Likert scale, this is the equivalent of being “a fence-sitter.” It was decided to re-analyse the results for each item based on “disagree” (1 or 2), “agree” (4 or 5), or “undecided” (3). By separating out the undecided component in the responses, the results can show more clearly whether students agree or disagree with the items in the questionnaire. The results of some of the individual items where a significant portion of students have either agreed or disagreed with the statement will be discussed further.

Freedom of choice is a powerful motivator. As shown in Figure 1, a clear majority of the students, 57% of the students, have expressed a preference for being able to have an input in selecting the topics they study. One of the reasons is that the students consider topics chosen by them as being more interesting than the ones found in the course textbook. Almost half of the students rated the textbook as less interesting than the articles presented by their peers. By allowing the students to select some of the topics and materials to study in the reading course, it may raise the perceived enjoyment of the learning activity. This is one of the key components in determining students' motivation to learn (Chambers, 1999). If the materials are more interesting, the students are more inclined to engage with and process the information to a deeper level (Tomlinson, 1998). It is obvious that this is one area which needs to be further developed and researched when using peer teaching in the reading classes. Further action research can be conducted to investigate which topics are considered to be highly

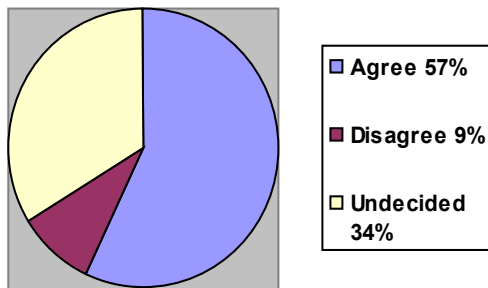


Figure 1. I want to be able to choose my own topics.

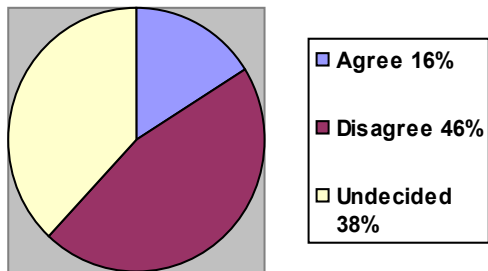


Figure 2. The topics in the textbook were more interesting than the articles chosen by other students.

interesting and how the information may be processed more deeply.

Almost half of the students indicated a higher rate of recall from studying the materials covered in the peer teaching sessions than in the reading sections of their course textbook (Figure 3.) This suggests that the students are processing the information and associated language to deeper level. This is consistent with constructivist theories of learning, which emphasize that knowledge is uniquely constructed by each individual. People integrate new information with their prior knowledge to construct new meanings and understanding as a result of their interactions with their surroundings (Benson, 2001; Jacobs et al., 2008). By having to present an article and work with others, it seems that some students are moving from the simple rote-learning type of short-term knowledge needed to pass tests to more “action knowledge” because of a more active involvement with the materials. Action knowledge according to Brown (1976, as cited in Benson, 2001) is knowledge that has been integrated into the learners’ perception of the world and has become part of their own knowledge as result of the learners’ active involvement in the learning process. The beneficial experience of teaching something to others is clearly endorsed by almost two-thirds of the students (Figure 4). In the present survey, the reasons why it was or was not a beneficial experience were not further explored. This is one area that will be investigated in further class surveys of peer teaching.

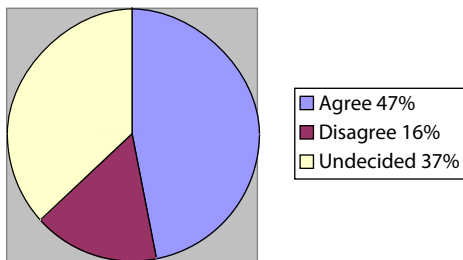


Figure 3. I can remember the content of my chosen article more than the reading sections from the textbook.

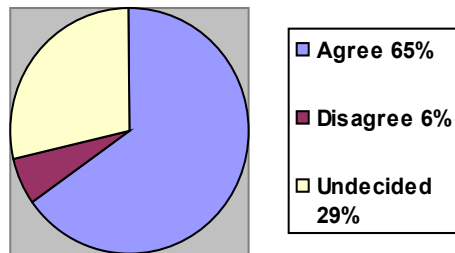


Figure 4. Teaching something to others is a good experience for me.

Preparing the materials for the peer teaching session provides an opportunity for the student-teacher to exercise the reading skills that they have learnt in class. These skills include skimming, scanning, identifying the general topic and key points, and making inferences. Over half of the students felt that preparing the worksheet for their article presentation allows them to use the reading skills that they have learnt in class (Figure 5.) The fact that more than half the students perceive peer teaching as useful for practicing what they have learnt in the skills-building lessons in the reading classes may add to their positive motivation to learn during the peer teaching sessions (Chambers, 1999).

Foreign Language Anxiety and the fear of being placed in the spotlight are affective factors which may negatively affect the learners' experience and progress in learning a foreign language (Horwitz, 1986; Oxford, 1999). Having to perform in a foreign language in front of a large audience of more than 30 of their peers can be stressful and produce enough negative anxiety to hinder the learners' performance, memory, and ability to use the target language. Offering the students a less daunting, more supportive environment in small study groups may reduce their anxiety in using a foreign language (Crandall, 1999). A significant portion (43%) of the students endorsed small groups in terms of giving them confidence or lowering their anxiety in making a presentation (Figure 6). The teachers involved here consider developing their presentation skills in the peer teaching sessions in the reading classes and in their CALL classes, where they give PowerPoint presentations, as equipping them with one set of skills that they will need in the future. In the students' seminars and computer lab sessions in their

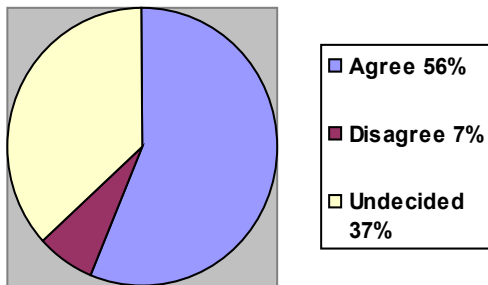


Figure 5. Making the article presentation worksheet lets me practice some of the reading skills learnt in class.

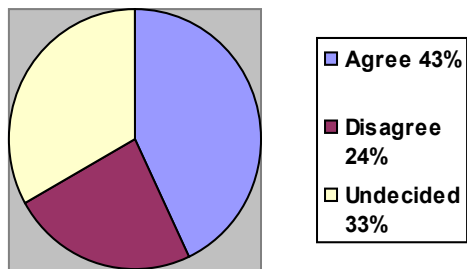


Figure 6. I felt more confident doing peer-teaching in small groups than giving a presentation to a whole class.

fourth year, they are required to give presentations, so peer teaching develops their presentation skills in a supportive environment.

The open-ended questions yielded a variety of unique responses by one or two students. However, there were several sets of answers that yielded some common responses. The most common grouping of answers to the question about, “What is the most difficult thing about the article presentation?” was to choose an appropriate article. One hundred and three respondents out of 219 indicated selecting an article as the most difficult aspect of peer teaching. Other things that the students found the most difficult are “finding the key points” (9 responses), and “making the questions in the worksheet” (12 responses).

There were very few responses to “How the article presentation activity could be improved?” The only significant response expressed by multiple students “is giving the study groups more time to do the in-class peer teaching sessions” (8 responses).

Guidelines for implementing peer teaching

The importance of effective ground rules is key, in order to have a smooth pre-activity model that is transparent for the students to follow. Text selection for this particular model had an EAP objective. Effective reading in an academic context has a certain purpose to obtain information, understand ideas and theories, and understand authors’ viewpoints and to seek evidence to support students’ own ideas (Jordan, 1997 as cited in Grasso, 2005). Obtaining information was the main goal of this process. In fact, this

activity could also be effective in ESP reading classes. In this particular context, using more sophisticated texts such as editorials from newspapers that contain more nuanced language, which would have been too difficult for the participants. Keeping the content parameters within current high interest topics is important. The length and density of the texts also requires guidance.

The language focus of the worksheet enables the instructor to further support the pre-activity process and help the peer teacher complete the language activities. As suggested above, the organization of the text presents the most complex part of this activity. The wide access to resources, both in print and electronic formats, gives language instructors a wealth of materials from which to select. However, as language learners come into contact with more dense and complex materials, they need more scaffolding to facilitate reading comprehension (Jiang & Grabe, 2007). If pre-reading checklists including questions to answer, or using graphic organizers, can help in this process, requires further research.

In summary, the following concise guidelines should be considered when implementing peer teaching sessions in a reading course.

- Transparent models and demonstration
- Guided text selection-with a strong emphasis on high interest themes
- Example articles to demonstrate appropriate length, density, and language
- Scaffolding of language exercises-particularly in the early stages of the instruction-text organization requires a strong focus

- In-class practice sessions in summarizing and identifying key points
- Allot sufficient time to establishing the activity in its early stages
- Provide model discussion language to help facilitate the discussion phase of peer teaching sessions
- Task goals must be clear

It is important to consider and adapt these guidelines for one's teaching situation. Spratt and Leung (2000) found that having students peer teach each other is insufficient to generate all the positive effects of peer teaching, such as increased motivation and sense of progress, without it being accompanied by careful guided preparation and clear examples of worksheets and activities.

Conclusion

Supplementing the skills-based reading courses with peer teaching has clearly added a more interesting and motivating dimension to the reading materials covered. Allowing students to present an article of their choice to small groups of peers offers them: additional opportunities to practice their reading skills learnt in class; a more supportive environment to hone their presentation skills; a motivation to engage more deeply with authentic materials selected by their peers and themselves; and a cooperative learning component to a reading class.

This was the first year that peer teaching was employed in the skills-based reading courses. Some things need to

be fine-tuned, such as providing the students with more training and additional support in selecting their articles and preparing for the peer teaching sessions. The language support offered in the early stages of this process needs to focus more on how texts are organized. This is a crucial aspect that students have difficulty in understanding and processing. Finally, the effects of peer teaching needs to be explored further as the survey instrument employed here is fairly rudimentary.

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Appendix 1

Article presentation worksheet

Article Title: _____

Author: _____

URL: _____

Date Retrieved: _____

Exercise 1: Key Words

Match the key words with their English and Japanese meanings.

- | | |
|--------------|----------|
| 1. _____ () | a. _____ |
| 2. _____ () | b. _____ |
| 3. _____ () | c. _____ |
| 4. _____ () | d. _____ |
| 5. _____ () | e. _____ |
| 6. _____ () | f. _____ |
| 7. _____ () | g. _____ |
| 8. _____ () | h. _____ |

Exercise 2: Key Points (Write down two key points. Max.15 words for each key point.)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Exercise 3: Comprehension Questions (Write down two questions for other students to answer after they have read the article.)

Q1. _____

A1. _____

Q2. _____

A2. _____

Exercise 4: Discussion Question

Appendix 2

E2 (intermediate) reading syllabus

Week	Content	Assessment
1	Orientation Article Presentation: Teacher Demo 1	Class work 1
2	Reading Skills Article Presentation: Teacher Demo 2	Class work 2
3	Reading Skills Collect Student 1's article and worksheet	Class work 3
4	Reading Skills Article Presentation: Student 1	Class work 4
5	Reading Skills Collect Student 2's article and worksheet	Class work 5
6	Reading Skills Article Presentation: Student 2	Class work 6
7	Reading Skills Collect Student 3's article and worksheet	Class work 7 Quiz 1
8	Reading Skills Article Presentation: Student 3	Class work 8
9	Reading Skills Collect Student 4's article and worksheet	Class work 9
10	Reading Skills Article Presentation: Student 4	Class work 10

Week	Content	Assessment
11	Reading Skills Collect Student 5's article and worksheet	Class work 11
12	Reading Skills Article Presentation: Student 5	Class work 12
13	Reading Skills Collect Student 6's article and worksheet	Class work 13 Quiz 2
14	Review Article Presentation: Student 6	Class work 14
15	Review Final Test	Class work 15 Final Test