

The Realignment of Teaching Reading in Today's Classroom

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Introduction

The learning world around us is changing all the time and Tertiary Educational institutions in Japan need to have the notion that they have to develop and reinforce an environment that establishes a learning approach that helps learners assume responsibility for creating their own learning; to be self-directed young adult learners and generate as much learning as they can from within themselves- that is learners assuming control of their own learning. This idea is not really a novel idea as Kulich (1970 as cited in Merriam and Brockett, 1997) provides many examples of this throughout history; such as Socrates, Alexander the Great Caesar and Descartes; and Gibbons and others (1980 as cited in Merriam and Brockett, 1997) describes the self-directed learning of more contemporary figures, including Frank Lloyd Wright, Harry Truman and Malcolm X. However, when we observe many learners' behaviour within Japan in a reading class we can make a general statement that the learners have the notion that the Teacher is the person responsible for both their learning and teaching. Also, that they as learners are required to have their progress and outcomes " signed off " by the Teacher.

Also, at the same time the institutions should embrace a process of change in their teaching methodology and understand that the transformation is essential. What has caused this need? Recent literature illustrates that most young people spend a lot of time on their technical devices, so this changing pattern of using technology has required institutions to redefine the traditional methodology of teaching.

ISSN 0910-500X

英文學思潮

THOUGHT CURRENTS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

VOLUME XCII

2019

THE ENGLISH LITERARY SOCIETY

OF

AOYAMA GAKUIN UNIVERSITY

青山学院大学英文学会

This paper examines the effects of introducing XReading, (an online, virtual library with graded readers that includes a learner management system (LMS) that allows teachers to monitor and assess their students' reading. It allows teachers to know which books their students are reading, have read, how well do they remember the content of the books. Also, how many words they have read and their reading speed). It will also review how did this program both build upon skills the students already possessed, and at the same time engage them both in and out of the classroom.

USING RESOURCES

Such tools (Virtual Libraries) offer the opportunity for institutions to create a learning environment that moves away from the traditional learning environment that transmits knowledge from "teacher" to "student" through the traditional tools available to students. They can create an environment that utilises the new technical devices (smartphones, tablets, computers) that have become an integral part of our lives, into the classroom and into the overall learning process. Especially, now that the internet has become invaluable to all students.

The demand for a "higher and new" level of education has come about as a result of as Prensky (2001, cited in Merga 2014) characterized "the current generation of adolescents as Digital Natives who are all "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games and the internet". However, with this change in the learning tools available to the learners, there has been a degree of uncertainty about what type of reading tools should be used to meet these changes; should students be encouraged to read eBooks or the traditional paper versions to enhance their learning.

NOTIONS ABOUT LEARNING

Learning has to be seen as a continuing process, and if it is to be successful the learner must be active in the process and the institution they are attending has to be seen as a "Learning Organisation" (L/O), as defined by various

authors, Senge (1990), Marsick & Watkin(1996). Here in Japan this means that the students have to move away from the general philosophy of education that there is a teacher and a student; the former has the knowledge and is never questioned or asked to explain anything outside of the relevant text and provide a direct translation when teaching reading. Also, teachers should not treat students as if they were empty vessels to be filled with the teacher's knowledge, or concentrate only on the products of learning and ignore the process (Usher 1985)

BACKGROUND

The Aoyama University English Department in 2017 displayed the ability to accommodate to change and shift the tasks they required teachers to carry out in their classrooms. To explore how to develop and enhance learners' motivation and at the same time develop their learning. These changes can be seen to be attributes of a L/O, as they attempted to evolve the program by piloting a program that introduced the Xreading online program. They broadened the program's scope to create an environment that promotes technology in and out of the classroom and in the students' learning process. With the aim to determine if it generated an improvement in their reading ability, and developed and strengthen other areas of their learning; to determine what learning occurs when learners are left to their own devices (pun intended).

The purpose of this paper is to present an observation of my students' interaction and how they felt about their experience with the new learning process in the first semester of 2017. In this experiment even though the students' reading achievement was the major focus of the experiment, this review's attention is given to reading as an integrated skill. Students were required to discuss what they had read and provide ongoing evaluation of their experience, both orally and in written form.

IN CLASS OBSERVATION AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

It is important to note at the beginning of this evaluation that this learning experience encouraged the learners to be active in their own learning, both in and out of class; it highlighted several points about the students' behaviour towards a new learning tool. One of the positive consequences of this experiment is its effect on various learners. The participants in the class in general came from a learning environment that was traditionally structured and in their previous reading classes had been required to focus on the translation of texts, grammar, and rote learning of vocabulary. Where there was no emphasis on speaking and listening comprehension of the texts they had read.

The first thing noticed in the intensive reading activity was that there were two general divisions of students; those that were really interested in the activity and were actively involved in the cognitive process of reading and tried to understand the meaning of what they had read. They were engaged with the content and could relate it to their own worlds. When interviewed there was a very positive response about how they were able to learn 'new things' about their reading and about themselves in completing the reading tasks. This was highlighted in how they were able to create a "springboard" for the discussion they had with their partner(s);

- a pair of students discussed how poverty is a problem in many countries and not so much in Japan

- a pair of students talked about their own goals, as in one of them had read about a character in their novel was trying to achieve a specific goal.

On the other hand, there were those who did not really engage in the reading and "faked it"; it seemed that their goal was to appear to be paying attention to what they had read. This was highlighted when it came to discuss what they had read. They simply provided a narrative of their reading and found it

challenging to integrate what they had "read" into any sort of dialogue.

- one student stated, "I do not really understand what I read, I just read as fast as I can"

- several students always simply offered limited responses and never explored the information that they had gathered from the texts they had read in the 15 minutes of class time.

ACTION LEARNING

After allocating 15 mins in class reading of their text (on their devices) they were asked to explain their understanding of what they had read with their partner. They were given the opportunity to have a discussion and display their active listening skills (asking basic W/H and comprehension questions. Also, questions from a worksheet that was provided to them in the second week of the semester).

In the later part of the semester, the students were divided into groups (four or five in a group) and asked to discuss what they had read and they were able to take notes. They were encouraged to express their ideas and not worry about making mistakes and not merely "parrot" information.

This activity allowed the students to integrate all the skills (writing, reading, listening and speaking) to produce dialogue that displayed their communicative ability to discuss the text that they had just read. The students were able to decide on what they wanted to discuss, what to focus on and it allowed them to decide how active they wanted to be in their learning process; and at the same time learn from others in a sharing environment.

In this observation, it was obvious that there were students who were not comfortable with the idea of assuming responsibility for their own independent learning and those who were willing to go further and create

dialogue within the group that included questioning and giving feedback to others, to either clarify their classmates' comments or ask them to elaborate on them.

To provide a quantitative evaluation of the classes' interaction for the semester with xreading the average book level for the semester was 6.3 (high elementary/ Intermediate level) with only two students achieving double figures in this category; 11.8 and 10. (advanced level)

In regard to achieving the 84,000-word goal that was stated to them in the second week of class, only three students achieved this goal; 94,234 words, 95,348 words and 127,628 by the end of classes in July. On the other hand, one student had read only 9091 words! The average words read for the class was 46,956 for the 14 weeks.

DEVICES USED

During the semester 98 % of the students completed their intensive reading on their smart phones and two students always did the task on their PCs. When asked, to explain why they chose to read with this device, both stated, "It is easier to read, concentrate and understand the context. It is a lot easier to access the program and move between pages. Also, it makes it easier when we take the quizzes".

ACCESSIBILITY TO THE PROGRAM

The students were able to access the software with no problem, 99% of the time. On one occasion all 24 of the group could not log on and at the start of the class (9:05am), so the starting time for the intensive reading activity commenced at 9:15am. To avoid this problem, the starting time for this activity each week was varied, to avoid an Internet bottleneck that occurs when many users try and access a network at the same time.

On several occasions students experienced problems trying to add books or

turn pages, however, these problems were solved when the students logged on to the program again.

STUDENTS' EVALUATION OF THE READING ACTIVITY

Even though this was not required in the initial instructions given to teachers, it is my belief the students should have ongoing self-reflection on their learning, especially in such an experiment. This provided several contrasting perspectives on this new learning environment.

At the end of each month the students were asked to complete an anonymous short evaluation about their reading; They were encouraged to just write short answers as the time allocated was 5-10 minutes.

The statements they were given to complete were:

- a) I am interested/not in reading books (in English) because
- b) I would recommend/not recommend reading English books because
- c) I think that extensive reading can/cannot benefit my learning

Here it must be stated that 99% of the comments over the two months were favourable.

Some of the students' comments:

S1- I can read English paragraph without translating into Japanese

S2 -I think that extensive reading can benefit my learning because books have a lot of knowledge for me

S3 -Reading English story let us know the actual use of words, or idioms so we can attain benefit which cannot gain only learning with textbooks

S4- The order of the information is very different from Japanese, so it is worth reading

S5 -It is easy to read, and you can enjoy reading English long story. You can get more vocabulary

S6 -I can recommend reading in other language. It will be good exercise for my brain

On the other hand, there were students that did not like this activity:

S1 -I have to spend more time for reading in English than in Japanese. So I do not like to read in English. I do not know much I understand the context of English books. So, I am not proud of recommending reading English books.

S2- (verbally) I feel it is strange having to read in class along with all the other students. I usually read when I have free time This is the first time I have done this activity at university.

Some negative comments in regard to the doing the reading on their smartphones:

S1- I am not interested in this activity and I always forgot that I had to do this. I think if I have a paper book, I will carry it and do not forget it

S2- I have not used xreading outside of the class because it needs huge data capacity and I do not have wifi access whenever I am free. Also, the books there are not interesting for me.

CONCLUSION

While this observation is far from complete, it provides some insight into how students handle using technology, as an academic tool to enhance their learning. Even though the majority of the class did not achieve the required goal of 84,000 words before the end of the 14 weeks, based on the students' evaluations they did enjoy external reading for this school related activity.

One major factor relating to productivity of the students' achievement could be related to the preference of the students in reading non-academic materials on their technological devices; more specifically on their smartphones.

There is no debate, technology plays an important part in our students' learning process, as they are now have the ability to access information without having to step into a library. However, maybe in regard to reading, the students prefer like a majority of the their peers from a number of countries, reading physical paper books rather than on their electronic devices, as

reported by American University linguistic professor Naomi S. Baron (2015).

However, it must be stated that obviously, there are advantages and disadvantage to both versions of books, and it would be a grave error to eliminate all electronic devices in this experiment. One suggestion that could assist students' performance in this experiment is to get the students to use devices such as Kindles, ipads or their laptops and ask students not do the reading on their smartphones.

As a general observation students frequently use their phones to multitask between social media, entertainment or to a lesser degree reading; however, in this case these include ebooks or manga in their native language.

To conclude, one thing that is certain is that we as educators should always be encouraging our students to understand that through the advancement of technology, and they should embrace this new era of hands-on electronic interactive technology as a "educational tool"; they can attain more knowledge and learn different skills; as to develop themselves in this "new" learning environment

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