

Using On-Line Summaries with Books from Extensive Reading Courses

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Abstract

Japanese college students usually have not read extensively in either Japanese or English. I started an “ESL corner” in the library with several hundred graded readers for students. Last year I started a new project in which students write descriptions of the graded readers and put them online. The result is a database of information on graded readers from the ESL corner, so future students can use that database to help them choose the book they want to read based on comments from other students.

I give instructions for writing the book description, which should include information about the target audience, the purpose of the book, the content, characteristics of the book, and the student’s comments. Students write between 200 and 500 words, depending on their English proficiency.

This procedure includes peer critique and rewriting. For most students, this project is their first opportunity to think about audience analysis and analysis of content as well as the purpose of the book, the author’s intent, etc., when they read.

Through this project, students write something that will be of use to others rather than just writing for an assignment, and they take the work more seriously. While it was developed in a Japanese context, I believe that it is useful for teachers in many countries. Extensive reading is important for students to improve their English and graded readers are useful materials in that training. The database of information about graded readers will be useful for future students' activities.

INTRODUCTION

Japanese college students are not used to reading extensively in either Japanese or English. They have been trained to translate English words into Japanese words using their knowledge of grammar. Recently communication in English has become more important in English courses, and many English teachers feel it is necessary to teach extensive reading and train students to read and understand English without translation.

However, college students' English language proficiency has become lower, and reading passages in English textbooks has been getting shorter and shorter, with fewer reading passages in each textbook. Our previous surveys found that reading textbooks have a total of 5,000 to 10,000 words, with most textbooks closer to 5000 words (Yoshida et al., 1986; Kitao et al., 1987; Kitao et al., 1988). The total number of words has still been getting lower, and some publishers want to publish textbooks with few pages of reading passages. These textbooks are for one-year English classes, which have about forty clock hours.

Most students have never read an English book, except for textbooks assigned for classes. They are not necessarily satisfied with a few, short reading passages, and some of them even try to read English books other than textbooks. However, students often find the books they try too difficult for them, and they soon give up.

In addition to having too little actual reading, some English textbooks are very difficult and not appropriate for extensive reading. Also, since students' interests are very diverse, no one textbook is going to be of interest to all students. Whatever textbook a teacher chooses, there will be some students who find it interesting and some students who do not.

INDIVIDUALIZING READING LESSONS AND GRADED READERS

In the United States, the practice of individualized reading is advanced, and there are many situations where students can choose a book to read based on their ability, interests, and motivation, read a couple of pages, and if the difficulty level is suitable, read the entire book (Shimatani et al., 1987).

There are English books for non-native speakers of English, mainly from publishers from the United States and Britain, for extensive reading. They are called "graded readers," since they are graded according to difficulty, and their vocabulary level is shown. There are two types of graded readers. One type is original writing in easy English, and the other type is famous books rewritten in easy English. There are a few thousand graded readers available from various publishers. The difficulty level is determined by vocabulary, length of readings, length of sentences and complexity of grammar, necessity of prior knowledge, and various other factors. However, because vocabulary level has the strongest influence on difficulty, and determining difficulty level based on vocabulary is reliable, textbooks are chosen on that basis and extra curricula reading lessons are given (Hill & Thomas, 1988).

Graded readers are often shelved in the class library and used in extra reading lessons outside the class. Shanefield (1986) reports that she established an ESL corner in a public library, where foreigners and

immigrants can check out graded readers in Princeton, New Jersey, USA. The importance in her project is that the books are classified into four levels based on vocabulary, so that readers can choose an appropriate book for their English proficiency. The classification of levels is done simply based on catalogues of the publishers. Many learners have checked the books out, read them, and improved their English.

I started an ESL corner with a few hundred graded readers in the library at Doshisha University in 1988, based on the above idea, and let students read those graded readers. Those graded readers are classified into four levels based on vocabulary level: less than 1,000, less than 2,000, less than 3,000 and more than 3,000 word levels. I wrote a handout entitled "Pleasure Reading" (see Appendix), which is an introduction to graded readers. It includes an introduction to the concept of graded readers, an explanation of why extensive reading is beneficial in improving reading proficiency, a description of the ESL corner, advice on how to choose books, etc. I also made a book report form for a summary of the book and readers' comments. I requested the library to purchase graded readers every year. As of the end of the 2001 school year, the library had about 1,200 books (280 titles at the elementary level, 454 titles at the low intermediate level, 262 titles at the high intermediate level, and 179 titles at the advanced level and some overlapping).

After students began reading, they had discussions over whatever graded readers they had read and exchanged ideas about what kinds of books were interesting, etc. They read a couple of books during the course. I also gave extra point projects for reading those books and writing a report. They enjoyed reading easy English books. I have reported some results of these projects (Kitao, 1989; Kitao, et al., 1990) and published some papers on advantages of the ESL Corner, too (Kitao & Shimatani, 1988; Shimatani et al., 1987).

THE USEFULNESS OF A DATABASE ON GRADED READERS

As an introduction to the graded reader project, students read materials available on my web site, including the “Pleasure Reading” handout. They learn that they should read graded readers without a dictionary and enjoy reading itself. They learn what graded readers are and how vocabulary levels are determined. They learn the titles of graded readers available and how to choose an appropriate level of difficulty for their own reading.

Among the materials on my web site is a long list of graded readers. This allows students to see a list of the titles and authors of all the available books classified by vocabulary level into four levels. However, students cannot get detailed information about the graded readers.

Thus students have to go to the library and see the graded readers, and even then, it is difficult to decide whether they would find a book interesting, based only on the cover and perhaps reading a paragraph or two of it. To solve this problem, I came up an idea of making a database of descriptions of the available graded readers and put it on the Internet. I found that although each description of a book is short, a compilation of many descriptions can become a useful information source. A good example of this is Thomas Robb’s “Famous Personages in Japan,” which has many short descriptions of famous people of Japan classified into categories. Though each description is short, but taken together, the descriptions form a useful source of information.

Teaching students to write a description of graded readers makes it possible to give individualized lessons in reading and writing in English. Also it builds a database of descriptions of graded readers, which will be useful to future students who read graded readers. Students are aware that their writing is something that will potentially be of benefit to many people,

rather than just being an assignment that will be read only by the teacher. Therefore, they pay more attention to what they are doing and try to do their best to write a good description.

SUMMARY WRITING PROJECTS OF GRADED READERS

After having students read graded readers for several years, I started a new project last year in which students were assigned to write a description of the graded reader they have read and put it online. Part of the purpose of this assignment was to make a database of graded readers available in the library's ESL corner, so that future students can use that database to choose which book they would read in advance rather than just choosing a book at random based on the title of the book. I tried to accomplish three goals with this assignment: instruction using extensive reading, instruction in writing in English, and preparing for future individualized instruction of extensive reading by building a database.

Procedure

When I give this assignment, I begin by going over the handout "Project for Future Readers of Graded Readers" (see Appendix) and explaining it in detail.

I give students an orientation to extensive reading and graded readers using "Pleasure Reading" (see Appendix). I show students what kinds of graded readers are available using the list of graded readers. I show students "Graded Readers: Database" and point out which books already have descriptions.

I give students one week to choose three graded readers that they want to read. They have to choose books not already included in the database of descriptions. They claim them and get permission to work on them, so that

no two students are working on the same book. This is done by e-mail, and on a first come first served basis. I make a list on the web, and students know which books are already taken.

I give instructions for writing the book description, which should include who the targeted audience is, what the purpose of the book is, what its content is, what the characteristics of the book are, and what comments or reactions the student has about the book. I show the exact format using a sample. The descriptions are between 200 and 500 words, depending on the student's English proficiency.

Before writing their descriptions, students read descriptions of graded readers that are already in the database. We have discussions on them in the classroom, including what is good about each description, what could have been improved, etc.

Students then write their own descriptions and upload them to the database web page. Students in the same group read each others' descriptions and send each other comments or suggestions for improvement by e-mail. Then students revise their descriptions using comments from the group members.

Benefits and Problems

This type of assignment is unusual for students. They do not often have to think about audience analysis and analysis of the content of their reading, and they do not often have to think about the purpose, etc., of the books they are reading. In this assignment, they have to think about those topics carefully when they read a book. They also experience the point of view of both the writer and the reader on the same writings, and they gain a better understanding of what is easy to read and how to write so that readers can understand them better. Therefore, in addition to forming a useful database, the project introduces students to a new way of thinking.

Students often seem to have difficulty following the format. No matter

how much I emphasize the format, some students have difficulty with it. However, with the opportunity to get feedback, both from me and from other students in their group, and to rewrite the description, most students are eventually able to write acceptable descriptions.

I have done a smaller, similar project on reading intercultural communication books in Japanese in communication courses, but students have had many problems with writing descriptions, even in Japanese.

Through this project, students have an opportunity to communicate in the real world rather than just doing an artificial assignment for the teacher. They do the work more seriously. This project is useful for reading, thinking, and writing in English.

CONCLUSION

Reading graded readers is very effective for extensive reading. Students seem to enjoy it much compared with traditional intensive reading. For this individualized instruction of extensive reading, the book, *The Longman Guide to Graded Reading* (Livingstone, C., Pike, H., Tadman, J., Tunnacliffe, D., & King, J., 1987) is very useful. Robb (1999) provides some useful materials for extensive reading. I have included some useful materials which I made and am making. (See the list of “Materials” below.) I hope they will be useful for your individualized instruction in extensive reading.

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Appendix

Project for Future Readers of Graded Readers

Your task is to read one graded reader that is low intermediate or above and that has not already had a description written, that is, a new book. Your description will be posted on the Internet, and your description should be helpful to someone considering reading the book. The description should be between 200 and 500 words long.

Instructions:

Read “Pleasure Reading”.

1. See the list of books to choose possible books
 2. Go to the ESL Corner of the library and choose one book to read.
 3. When you choose a book, read the first few pages to make sure it is a book you will enjoy reading.
 4. Read the entire book without consulting a dictionary. Try to read it in one or two sittings, if possible.
 5. Write a report on the book. It should include the following six items:
 - a. Heading — follow the format in the examples (title, author, publisher, year, number of pages, size, ISBN number)
 - b. Audience analysis — for whom is this book written, that is, who is the intended audience?
 - c. Topic of the book
 - d. Brief description of the content of the book
 - e. Characteristics of the book
 - f. Your comments about the book, for example, how the book made you feel, what new things the book made you think about, whether it is difficult, whether it is interesting, who you would recommend it to, etc.
- (Look at a model sample and the examples to understand what is expected in the description.)

Pleasure Reading

It is fun to read English books. You will obtain information that you might not be able to get from Japanese books. You will find that some of the books which you may have read in their Japanese translations sound different and are sometimes more interesting than in their translated versions.

How many English books have you read since you started studying English several years ago? What! Not even one! Well, maybe that's not surprising. You may have been too busy studying to get good grades and pass college entrance exams. Now you have more free time. Why don't you read English books?

Some of you may have tried to read English books but may have given up. Some books are very difficult. There are many English books in our library, and you can try to read them if you have the confidence.

Even if you do not have the confidence to read the English books in the library, you can enjoy reading English books. There is "English as a Second Language Corner" in the section of English books in our library. There are several shelves and about 600 books of various types. They include mysteries, biographies, classics, science fiction, plays, nonfiction, and adventure. They are divided into four levels according to the level of their vocabulary. The easiest level is elementary (E), which uses only 300-1,000 words. The second is low intermediate (LI), at the 1,000-2,000 word level. The third is high intermediate (HI), which has 2,000-3,000 words. The highest level, advanced (A) has 3,000-7,000 words. Even the books of the advanced level are much easier than ordinary English books.

If you decide to read some of these books, it is a good idea to read something you are interested in, the kind of book you might ordinarily read in Japanese. For example, if you like to read Sherlock Holmes in Japanese translation, try reading one of his books in English. Read the first couple of pages and find out if it is the right level for you. If it is too difficult, try something easier. The four levels will help you to decide which books to read. After you choose a book, the most important thing is that you enjoy reading it. Just try to understand the plot. Even if you find some words you do not

understand, don't use a dictionary immediately. Guess the meaning from the context. It is not important to understand everything written in the book. It is more important that you enjoy reading and understand the overall ideas. If you try reading several books, you will improve your reading comprehension.

Book Report

Class _____ Student # _____ Name _____

Title _____ / _____

Publisher _____ Publication Year _____

Level _____ Size _____ x _____ # of Pages _____

Topic _____

Main characters _____

Minor characters _____

Time period of the story _____

Location of the story _____

Time Required to Finish _____ hours _____ minutes

Boring 1 2 3 4 5 6 Interesting

Childish 1 2 3 4 5 6 Not Childish

Useless 1 2 3 4 5 6 Useful

Unsatisfactory 1 2 3 4 5 6 Satisfactory

Not recommended 1 2 3 4 5 6 Recommended

Organization Poor 1 2 3 4 5 6 Good

Grammar Difficult 1 2 3 4 5 6 Easy

Vocabulary Difficult 1 2 3 4 5 6 Easy

English (as a whole) Difficult 1 2 3 4 5 6 Easy

Prior knowledge assumed Much 1 2 3 4 5 6 Little

Comprehension (content) Difficult 1 2 3 4 5 6 Easy

Summary _____

Comments _____

英語多読クラスにおける図書のオンライン要約の利用

日本人大学生の多くは、日本語と英語の多読に慣れていない。大学の英語教育は精読のための訳読作業が中心で、今日でもこの教授法は多くの講読のクラスで実施されている。大学生に英語の容易な図書を多読させるために、図書館に「ESLコーナー」を設置して、グレイディッドリーダーズを千数百冊利用できるようにした。

2001年度から、学習者がグレイディッドリーダーズを利用して、その描写を英語で書き、オンライン上で読めるようにするプロジェクトを始めた。この描写を整理して、データベースを構築し、将来の読者がESLコーナーの図書を読むときに、図書の内容と既に読んだ学習者のコメントを利用して、図書の選択ができるように試みた。

学習者の書く描写は一定形式で統一し、予想される読者、図書の目的、内容、特徴と読者のコメントを書く。長さは書き手の英語力により、200-500語程度とした。

このプロジェクトの作業は、学習者同士で描写を互いに読み、文面をよりよくするための提案をし、書き直す作業を含んでいる。ほとんどの学習者にとって、このプロジェクトは、図書の予想される読者、内容、目的、著者の意図などをよく考えて読む初めての機会となった。

このプロジェクトを通して、学習者は自分のためだけでなく、他の人々に役立つものを書くことになり、非常に真面目に作業に取り組んだ。このようなプロジェクトは日本のみでなく、どの国でも実施可能である。英語力を高めるために多読は必要であり、そのためにグレイディッドリーダーズはよい教材であり、また、そして、このようなデータベースは将来の学習者に役立つと考える。