

Do Students Want to Read in English?: A survey of first-year students' attitudes toward reading.

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Introduction

Within the library at Keiwa College a great number of graded readers exist for students of English. This includes readers from six publishers with levels from 'easy-starts' to 'upper', totalling around 800 books. The levels are varied and the topics are stimulating enough for any reader to find something that he or she would be interested in reading. However, the readers, in their remote corner of the library, remain largely unused. Do the students know about the books? Do they have no interest in reading in English? As teachers of required, first-year English classes, we may assume the worst; that our students are only reading in class for credit so they can move on.

The following study is an attempt at finding out about student attitudes toward reading in English. Through a survey the students' views will be revealed and hopefully some of the benefits of using graded readers will emerge. Based on this data, recommendations will be made for reading in the classroom.

Literature Review

Previous research has demonstrated that using graded readers as a part of the curriculum can be of benefit to learners. Nation and Deweerdt define graded readers as:

...books specially written for learners of English using a controlled vocabulary and grammar. A typical graded reader series consists of books written at five or six vocabulary levels, beginning at around 300-400 words and increasing in stages to around 2500 words.(55:2001)

Wodinsky and Nation go on to posit that "these books provide learners with a chance to read without encountering large quantities of unknown words,

and thus learners are able to read successfully and get pleasure from their reading" (155:1988).

This section will go on to highlight some of those benefits from particular studies that utilised graded readers. Finally there will be a discussion of one of the criticisms of graded readers.

In the view of Stephen Krashen, we acquire language through comprehensible input.

The Input Hypothesis (IH) assumes that we acquire language by understanding messages. More precisely, comprehensible input is the essential environmental ingredient- a richly specified internal language acquisition device also makes a significant contribution to language acquisition. (Krashen 442:1989)

This view suggests that simply reading at a suitable level would be enough to facilitate learning. However, Nation and Deweerd (2001) argue that four strands should exist in approximately equal proportions in a language course. The four strands are: language-focused learning, meaning-focused output, meaning-focused input, and fluency development. Krashen's view of learning accounts for only the latter two while neglecting the first two strands. In light of this, Nation suggests that reading graded readers extensively should only be a supplement to traditional textbook reading activities (i.e., intensive reading). But it is a supplement that should not be ignored in a balanced curriculum.

There are numerous accounts of the successful use of graded readers in the classroom with a range of benefits reported for learners. These benefits include substantial gains in reading comprehension compared to learners instructed in 'traditional' intensive reading-only courses (Elley 2000; Leung 2002; Mason and Krashen 1997) and vocabulary growth (Krashen 1989; Leung 2002; Pigada and Schmitt 2006; Rodrigo, Krashen and Gibbons 2004). In addition to vocabulary growth, the use of graded readers also improves learners' spelling (Pigada and Schmitt 2006) and improves understanding of meaning of vocabulary (Pigada and Schmitt 2006), Grabe sums this up in that "the amount of people's overall exposure to print has a direct relation to vocabulary knowledge and comprehension abilities" (56:

2004). Use of graded readers has also been reported as having a positive effect on learner attitudes to reading in a second language (L2) (Asraf and Ahmad 2003; Leung 2002; Mason and Krashen 1997), increasing reading speed or fluency (Mason and Krashen 1997), improving grammar or English structures (Elley 2000; Rodrigo, Krashen and Gribbons 2004), and improving learners' writing (Elley 2000; Mason and Krashen 1997).

Some criticism exists, however, of graded readers saying that they are not good representations of the original work. In a paper that compared the original work, *Dracula*, with a simplified reader version, Nation and Deweerdt (2001), found this to be untrue. They argue that there are, in fact, varying qualities to be found in graded readers and this should not be overlooked when choosing which readers to acquire for the classroom or library.

In contrast to the view that the original is best, they found that the original version of *Dracula* contained too many previously unmet words. Some examples, from the original version of the book that would not necessarily be worth taking time out from the 'flow' of reading to learn were "alacrity, aquiline, baying, crags, diligence (a type of stagecoach), engendered, goitre, hospadars, oleander, polyglot" (Nation and Deweerdt 61:2001). It is for this reason that Nation and Deweerdt state that "most unsimplified text is just too difficult and does not provide the conditions necessary for learning through meaning-focused input" (62:2001).

Nation and Deweerdt argue that the reasons suggested by some researchers for the rejection of graded readers as a resource are negligible at best. Further, those reasons may even be attributable to other issues such as syllabus design. Quite the opposite, graded readers have a strong value for the language student. They posit, "To reject this resource is to effectively eliminate many of the essential strands of meaning-focused input and fluency development from language courses." (63:2001).

Description of class

The class surveyed is a first-year, Reading and Writing class. It is a Tobiyku class which means that the group is made up of students who placed high on the placement test. There are fourteen students, of which three had Chinese as their first language (L 1). The remainder of the class

had Japanese as their L 1 .

The Survey

A seven-point, Likert-type scale was used for the following four variables. They ranged from strong disagreement (- 3) to strong agreement (+ 3).

Attitudes toward reading in the L 1

This scale consists of three positively and three negatively worded items. A positive score reflects a positive attitude.

Attitudes toward reading in the L 2

This scale is comprised of three positively and three negatively worded items, with a positive score indicating a positive attitude.

Attitudes toward studying the L 2

Three positively and three negatively worded items comprise this measure. Positive scores reflect a positive attitude.

Perceptions of the usefulness of reading in the L 2

This measure consists of three positive and three negative items with a positive score indicating an affirmative feeling.

The following two variables were assessed using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 'never'(1) to 'always'(5).

Frequency of reading for fun in the L 1

This was measured using three items to assess how often learners read different materials such as magazines and books in the L 1. High scores reflect larger amounts of reading.

Frequency of reading for fun in the L 2

This was measured using three items to assess how often learners read different materials such as magazines and books in the L 2. A high score indicates frequent reading behaviour.

Results

Results are presented relating to the six scales described in the previous section. Results obtained from the survey are presented in Table 1.

	Mean	SD
Attitudes to reading in the L 1	6.71	8.89
Attitudes toward reading in the L 2	9.00	8.00
Attitudes toward studying the L 2	11.50	4.68
Perceptions of the usefulness of reading in the L 2	10.71	6.53
Frequency of reading for fun in the L 1	10.28	1.74
Frequency of reading for fun in the L 2	6.85	2.06

Table 1 : Descriptive results from the survey

It can be seen from Table 1 that students generally have a positive attitude towards reading in both the L 1 and the L 2, although a large variation is seen among the scores. Additionally, learners' attitudes towards studying the L 2, and their perceptions of the usefulness of reading in the L 2 are generally positive.

Table 1 shows that the learners surveyed undertake reading for fun in the L1 more frequently than in the L 2. The results of reading frequency show much less variation than the attitude results, indicating that all of the students exhibit similar amounts of reading for fun.

Discussion

In this study students reported a moderately positive attitude towards reading in the L 1. This attitude corresponds with large reported amounts of reading for fun in the L 1. However, attitude towards reading in the L 2 was found to be more positive than reading in the L 1. Despite this enhanced attitude towards reading in the L 2, students reported much lower amounts of reading for fun in the L 2. This indicates that while students have access to and utilise large amounts of text in the L 1, limitations on the availability of texts in the L 2 may be resulting in lower amounts of reading for fun in the L 2. This finding paralleled that of another researcher, Camiciottoli (2001), in her study of Italian university students.

It would appear that the positive attitude displayed by the students for reading in the L 2 is going to waste. By encouraging learners to use the graded reader resource, this discrepancy between positive attitude and low reading amount in the L 2 may be remedied. Further, as discussed above,

providing learners with access to texts at a suitable level may facilitate a broad range of language gains. How graded readers can be used in the classroom is discussed below.

Implications for teaching

Following on from the discussion of the data in which it was found that there is an untapped interest in reading in the L 2 within our students, this opportunity for language building is wasted without proper nurturing. It appears that resources are underused because of lack of knowledge of their existence by students and possibly by lack of encouragement by teachers. Although this latter point would need some verification. It is also likely that those students who do venture into the library and check out a graded reader, are unaware of how to use them effectively as, traditionally, classroom reading is of an intensive nature.

As teachers we often 'fill the air' with our own voices. Students need space to get used to the idea of quiet reading time. We may feel that extensive reading is a waste of class time when it could be done at home. I'd argue that assigning reading for homework demotes it to just another assignment rather than something to be enjoyed. This discourages further exploration of reading as an enriching leisure activity.

Teachers can emphasise the importance of reading by devoting class time to it. In doing this, the teacher can act as a model by reading at his or her own desk simultaneously with the students. This is suggested by Day and Bamford in their *Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading* in that "reading teachers are themselves readers, teaching by example the attitudes and behaviours of a reader" (italics in original) (140:2002). In such an environment, students are more likely to discover the enjoyment to be had by reading in a supportive atmosphere and, therefore, carry on in their own time.

Conclusion

To conclude in this study it has been deduced that our students do have an interest in reading. However, that interest is not being met. While students have revealed that they read less in English than in the L 1, it must also be noted that their attitude towards reading in English is highly positive.

Teachers can nurture this interest with the introduction of graded readers to the curriculum. Additionally, by posing ourselves as 'reader models', we can set an encouraging example within the classroom.

It is crucial to note that the class surveyed for this study is one comprised of students who perform well in the classroom. Therefore, we can assume that they have some sort of investment in English that drives them toward this achievement. This investment could be a need to speak English to a high level for a future job, for example, or simply to learn a language to add another 'string to his or her bow', as it were.

This data can only provide a snapshot of these particular students, and would no doubt have come out differently if a class of 'lower-level' students or those with less of an investment in the L 2 had been surveyed. A possible extension to this study would therefore be a survey of students of other levels. Further, surveying a class at the beginning and end of a course that includes the use of graded readers may reveal some interesting insights into how this kind of curriculum affects the attitudes of the learners. It might also be interesting to find out what kind of things our students like to read. Exactly what genres are popular? Perhaps we might better stock our graded reader section of the library with this knowledge.

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