

Transforming Demotivated Learners through Extensive Reading: Get Your Horse to Drink Water

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a study which investigated the effect of ‘class readers’ as the first step of an extensive reading program in a public school. One hundred twelfth grade students from a public vocational school participated in the study. An experimental group of fifty students read books chosen according to their level and interests for fifteen minutes every class while a control group did textbook related activities. To measure differences of two groups in reading proficiency, the change in reading rate and comprehension was assessed before and after the experiment. In addition, questionnaires designed to examine the attitude change and autonomy development were administered. Improvement was observed in reading comprehension competence of the experimental group while it was not in terms of reading rate. Questionnaire analysis suggests that ‘class readers’ significantly motivated the students to be involved in class but it was not enough to induce them into reading autonomously. Based on the results of the study, reading out of class coupled with ‘class readers’ from the beginning would produce more substantial improvement in reading rate and a sense of autonomy. Teachers’ consensus, in addition to institutional aid on material development, would lead to the success of an extensive reading program in public schools.

Key words: extensive reading program, class readers, vocational schools

I. Introduction

How do you get your horse to drink unfamiliar water? You can bring him water but if your horse takes one sniff of the water and bolts, then nothing can convince it to drink. You need a trick to get the horse used to drinking something new: to spike the untried water with apple juice, hay or whatever it likes. Once the horse gets the taste of the new water with its favorite flavor in it, you do not have to force him to drink. Teachers can share this riders’ tip, who would like to introduce extensive reading program for their students but do not know how to get it started. The primary characteristics of an extensive reading approach Day & Bamford(1998) described include ‘reading is individual and silent, at the students own pace, done when and where the student chooses’ and ‘students select what they want to read and have the freedom to stop reading material that fails to interest them.’ Unfortunately, too much freedom might overwhelm students with no idea of pleasurable reading. They may take just one look at a variety of materials on a wide range of topics a teacher ambitiously prepared and stop short if they have not tasted pleasure of reading before. It should be a teacher’s job to help them have a ‘sip’ of reading. Sip by sip with a teacher rather than gulp by gulp could lead students once afraid of reading English to be individual readers. This study examined ‘class readers(Greenwood, 1988)’, a single book read by a whole class, as the first step for installing an extensive reading program at public schools.

II. The Study

1. Participants

The subjects were consisted of one hundred third-grade students from a public vocational school in Busan. They have rarely had much access to English books other than a textbook which is invariably developed for an academic school and applied to a vocational school. Not to mention grammatical difficulties, stories in a textbook hardly validated vocational students' own experience, attitudes, and uniqueness since they were designed targeting average students at academic schools. Also, they were unlikely to do reading after class since most of their time was spent working to support their low-income family or improving work-related skills. In short, most vocational students are demotivated to study by their low socioeconomic status, limited financial resources, or past educational failure. It leads them to fall behind in reading.

2. Procedures

The study was conducted over a period of four months from March 2009 to June 2009. Of the 50 minutes each class, 15 minutes were used for 'class readers' and the rest was for the official syllabus. While 50 students in the experimental group read books, the other 50 in the control group did textbook-related activities. For the study, a teacher handed out copies of a reader to each student in the experimental group and then read aloud when students followed along with their own copies. This way the experimental students read at least seven readers in one semester. Table 1 shows the information about the readers they read during the study.

[TABLE 1] A List of Readers for the Study

Title	Author	Genre	Level	words	remark
Dino's Day in London	Stephen Rabley	Short story(comic)	Easystarts	795	pre test
The Fireboy	Stephen Rabley	Short story(didactic)	Easystarts		
The Missing Coins	John Escott	Detective fiction	Beginner	1,711	
Girl Meets Boy	Derek Strange	Romance	Beginner	1,810	
Daniel Radcliffe	Vicky Shipton	Biography	Beginner	2,028	
Rip Van Winkle & The Legend of Sleepy Hollow	Washington Irving	Fantasy	Beginner	3,700	
Lucky Break	John Escott	Short story(comic)	Easystarts	722	post test

A pre-test and a post-test were used to compare two groups. Two different texts, Dino's Day in London and Lucky Break, were selected, both of which were at the same level, of almost the same length, and of the same novelty to students. The dependent variable, reading proficiency, was assessed in terms of reading speed and comprehension. The pre-test was

administered before the experiment, asking the students to read one book and check how long it took. Then, as comprehension checks, they were requested to answer 20 questions selected by the teacher from materials provided in a publisher's website. The post-test was given one week after the entire experiment following the same methodology as the pre-test. Along with this, they completed questionnaires designed to examine the attitude change and autonomy development. A four-point Likert scale was used.

3. Results

At the pre-test, the reading rate differential between both groups was not statistically significant as the average rate of the experimental group(ER) was 78 words per minute and that of the controlled group(non-ER) was 73 words per minute($p = .459$). Despite reading experience for several months, both the control group and the experimental group made little improvement in terms of reading rate as shown in table 2. The result implies that the amount of reading during the study was not enough to improve students' speed of reading.

[TABLE 2] Reading Rate Changes in Both Groups

Group	Test	Mean	SD	t	p
ER	pre-test	78.02	25.83	-1.896	.061
	post-test	88.08	27.19		
Non-ER	pre-test	73.84	30.23	-1.181	.241
	post-test	80.19	23.02		

Regarding comprehension competence, there were little difference between the two groups before the experiment, as the average score of ER group in pre-test was 7.06 and that of non-ER group was 7.10($p = .216$). Table 3, however, presents the statistically significant improvement in ER group.

[TABLE 3] Reading Comprehension Test Results in Both Groups

Group	Test	Mean	SD	t	p
ER	pre-test	7.06	4.488	-5.009	.000*
	post-test	11.72	4.811		
Non-ER	pre-test	7.10	5.77	-1.247	.216
	post-test	8.44	4.95		

$p < .05$

The questionnaire results are as follows. The scale had a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of 0.77. Most students (92%) responded that this program was much easier and more interesting than a textbook, because readers were understandable even without word-for-word translation (84%). Neither their lack of grammatical competence (84%) nor limited vocabulary knowledge (80%) did prevent them from understanding the stories. Moreover, they were looking forward to the next class for the following episode (76%). The reason they found 'class readers' desirable was reading had nothing to do with any tests (92%) and there were no follow-up activities (88%). Students found it quite helpful to guess the meaning of unknown words (90%), to know the coordination of words and sounds (82%), and to retain new vocabulary more easily (74%). Even though majority of the students (74%) found

reading English books not as hard as they expected, still many of them (56%) were not positive about selecting and reading books on their own.

III. Discussion

Firstly, 'class readers' was effective in motivating students to get involved in English class, regardless of little improvement in reading rate. Since most of the students (88%) did not experience reading a real book in English before, the meaning of this study lies in providing them with opportunities to read and finish some books, thereby instilling confidence in the students about reading. Besides, the absence of tests or homework seemed to relieve them of their fear of English class. Four-month class readers progressed significantly in reading comprehension competence. It was possible to gauge what kinds of syntactic and semantic information students lacked by diagnosis of the pre-test and addressing these deficiencies when the teacher helped them understand the readers. For instance, it was found that many students ignored prepositions in processing sentences like 'Tommy eats lunch in his ____.' and filled out the blank with 'food'. During the program, students were induced to raise their consciousness about prepositions and how they changed the meaning of a sentence.

Not only that, but class readers did benefit the teacher under pressure to finish the prescribed syllabus who at the same time long for something enjoyable in class. No additional preparation was necessary but books: not a hassle. Even teachers in rush to finish their designated curriculum could find five to ten minutes a day if they trim a little bit off time for reading class. Based on the results of the study the following issues need to be discussed. Even though class reader is the first rung on the extensive reading ladder, reading out of class is necessarily recommendable in order for students to build up more confidence, meet reasonable amount of reading. This is grounded in the questionnaire to which respondents stated they were not ready to choose what they would read on their own. Furthermore, eighty or so words per minute is remarkably slow when compared to native readers who read 250 words per minute on average with 70% comprehension (Smith, 2004). It is still too slow if put together with slow native readers with 150 words per minute. Ten thousand words is not enough to expect some visible improvement when compared with one million words average elementary students in America read a year (Frukawa, 2006). The only way is to let them borrow books because it is almost impossible to increase class time at vocational schools for the students to read when national curriculum is considered.

While the result suggests the extensive reading program potentially improve students' reading comprehension competence, more fundamental approach is called for in order to strengthen it., the reading comprehension test result is quite limited for further development. Although basic level readers were carefully selected for the study, slow reading with 50% comprehension indicates that they were still demanding for many of vocational school students. Then, how can they fully understand textbooks which are much more difficult? No matter how helpful the program could be, it is nothing but a supplementary activity subject to change in the schedule. Here lies the necessity of more fundamental alteration such as textbook modification for vocational schools to be applied.

It will take a lot more time to see a greater impact of the extensive program on students. Even if 'class readers' is successful in terms of getting them to taste new water, a teacher needs to stay along with the entire extensive program as a facilitator. Under the Korean public school

system, a shared enthusiasm among teachers is required for this reason. When one passionate teacher transfer to another school with no other followers of the program left, the program will be stuck or dumped. The potential for success was observed during the experiment: some students asking confirmation checks or clarification requests, others being sympathetic with a character, still others predicting the next scene. These active participations are always enjoyable for teachers to see, but were not common in routine class. What is more agreeable for teachers, majority of schools have been subsidized by the government to build English library. Just take 10 minutes off your class to get your students to taste new water and they will be willing to get English books on their own.

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About the Presenter

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