

Designing the Tertiary Level Reading Curriculum in Japan — Issues Observed in a Linked Course Design —

日本の大学におけるリーディング カリキュラム デザイン — 連携科目デザインの課題 —

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Abstract

A linked course can be described as one where completion of one class is a prerequisite to taking another class. The latter class teaches content which builds upon material learned in the former class. This research investigates the current situation of English reading education in Japan, at the tertiary level of a private education institution in Hokuriku, Japan using students who have chosen to learn English as a second language. Development and results of a linked reading course/program at the tertiary level was previously found to be a success in general (Lynch, 2007), prompting its permanent adoption as a standard course design. This paper reviews this course design/set curriculum, four years after its creation and adoption.

Successes and failures of the program are discussed, as well as possible causes of results. It was found that the usage of a set curriculum in university, linked across two classes and using different instructors, yielded best results only in circumstances where the instructors were stakeholders in the original course design. Furthermore, it was found that the volume of reading material students cover could differ depending on the instructor.

It was concluded that not having instructors involved in the overall course design could lead to a disparity of standards and results within the reading class and the reading curriculum. As instructors tended to change every couple of years, the findings point to a need for redesigning the reading curriculum when such staff changes occur, involving the new instructors as core decision makers. Creating an environment where all teaching staff act as stakeholders in the curriculum design and outcomes could help to ensure similar expectations, improve lateral and longitudinal communication, and avoid a possible decline of standards and/or satisfaction in the reading class.

Keywords : Reading Curriculum, Linked Course Design, Tertiary English Education

1. Introduction

Reading, as part of language education, has been proven to be important in terms of overall success in that language (Fuchs et al, 2002). It is a foundational skill in students' academic careers; whether they be-

come strong or weak readers has considerable bearing on their success in further education and beyond (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). We are told that young adults can become motivated by a reading course that uses high level material for native speakers (Lynch, 2007), yet they also need a considerable amount of low level input to increase the amount of actual reading being done (Welch, 1997), (West, 1926).

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This paper investigates the results of a long-running university level reading program originally described in Lynch, 2007, and reviews what is thought to be important in such a reading program. Following this, the reality of the situation in the classroom is investigated, including deviations from expectations over time, results, and students' perceptions regarding the reading program.

The reading program in this study consists of classes entitled Reading 1 and Reading 2, both optional reading courses being taught mainly to first year students, each for one semester (15 classes of 90 minutes duration per class). The classes can also be taken by second year students who were not able to take the classes in their first year for various reasons. The reading classes become compulsory for those who choose to take advanced English certificates. Furthermore, those who take Reading 1 may choose not to take Reading 2 if they are not taking an advanced English certificate.

Reading is taught as a self contained subject, divided into an extensive reading class (Reading 1), followed by a supported-intensive reading class (Reading 2).

2. University Reading Program Outline

The university reading program (to be precise, students were from a two-year, private university) is that described in Lynch, 2007, and aims to provide the students with a solid reading foundation in their first semester (15 classes x 90 minutes), followed by more advanced reading in the second semester, building upon what was learned previously.

The first semester uses extensive reading techniques, which give the student a sense of accomplishment (Burden, 2002) and leads to raised motivation and self-belief through experience of success (Lynch, 2007).

The extensive reading classes expected the follow-

ing:

1. Have students read a large volume of reading material, at or below their reading level.
2. The above reading should be spread out among many short books. In this case, easy readers were used which were adapted (in difficulty and length) to suit the needs of learners of English.
3. Help give guidance to students' report writing.
4. Prepare students for a more difficult, following class (Reading 2).

In general, extensive reading leads to general understanding and enjoyment of a large volume of easy, short books at a fast and fluent pace (Welch, 1997). However, it was found that having classes which all consisted only of extensive reading techniques did not improve motivation and lead to continued reading of books in English (Burke, 2006).

Due to this, and also the knowledge that reading a foreign language in 'intensive-mode' can be an unavoidable necessity (Lynch, 2007), the second part of the reading program was decided to be a supported intensive program (intensive reading using native speaker level books, but using special support). The supported intensive reading program still gave students a sense of accomplishment, yet increased the level of the reading material to that of expectations of fluency.

The support given is as follows:

1. A topical, modern book which students can find interesting is used. The book should appeal to the student, not be chosen based on the interests of the teacher.
2. A movie of the book is used, with certain parts shown to help students understand/review.
3. A book specific dictionary (English-English, with some English-Japanese for very difficult words) should be created by the teacher. Students read through the list of words (listed by chapter) and translate words they do not know.

This is done BEFORE any reading of the book is tackled.

4. A short report is completed by the student, on each chapter.
5. Homework is checked at the beginning of each class.
6. A final test of the book is given.
7. Attendance is expected and checked.

The above methodology is given in detail in Lynch, 2007.

3. Teaching Staff Turnover and Resulting Issues

The new linked reading curriculum was first carried out in the 2005/2006 school year as a trial, with the results being used to create a solid, linked reading curriculum in the 2006/2007 school year. From that time to the present, five different teachers have worked on the program, reflecting both staff turnover and internal reassignment.

The classes originally ran as follows:

2005/2006 school year

◇ Reading 1 – Mr. B Reading 2 – Mr. L

2006/2007 school year

◇ Reading 1 – Mr. B Reading 2 – Mr. L

The above two teachers, Mr. B and Mr. L designed the linked reading curriculum, with much of the work on extensive reading done by Mr. B, and the supported-intensive reading by Mr. L. This was packaged into a linked reading curriculum, Reading 1 and Reading 2, respectively.

The following teaching staff changes occurred over the following years:

2007/2008 school year

◇ Reading 1 – Mr. C Reading 2 – Mr. S

2008/2009 school year

◇ Reading 1 – Mr. S Reading 2 – Mr. S

2009/2010 school year

◇ Reading 1 – Mr. S Reading 2 – Mr. L
2010/2011 school year

◇ Reading 1 – Mr. H Reading 2 – Mr. L

Mr. B retired from his position at the university before the 2007/2008 school year, and his responsibility for the Reading 1 class was taken over by Mr. C, a full time lecturer at the university. In the same year, Mr. L was moved from Reading 2 to another subject, and Mr. S, hired from a high school with connections to the university, was asked to teach Reading 2 at first, and in the following year, both Reading 1 and Reading 2. They were both (Mr. C, Mr. S) given the blueprint of the reading class plans and connected research papers before their work began. Mr. S taught Reading 1 (extensive reading) for two years, and Reading 2 (supported intensive reading) also for two years, resulting in him having full responsibility for the entire reading program at one stage.

Mr. L asked to be put back in charge of Reading 2 from the 2009/2010 school year. Mr. S left his post at the end of that year and Mr. H, a new full time university teaching staff member, was asked to take over the Reading 1 class.

4. Methods and Results

The students were instructed to read a number of books (originally, at least six) in the Reading 1 class, and to read a book written for native speakers of English in Reading 2. The students read the following books and wrote reports on each:

2005/2006 school year

◇ Reading 1 – 6~8 books¹

◇ Reading 2 – One book: Charlie and the Chocolate Factory²

2006/2007 school year

◇ Reading 1 – 6~8 books¹

◇ Reading 2 – One book: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe³

2007/2008 school year

- ◇ Reading 1 – 6~8 books¹
- ◇ Reading 2 – One book: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe³

2008/2009 school year

- ◇ Reading 1 – 6~8 books¹
- ◇ Reading 2 – One book: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe³

2009/2010 school year

- ◇ Reading 1 – 6~8 books¹
- ◇ Reading 2 – One book: The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency⁴

2010/2011 school year

- ◇ Reading 1 – Three books¹
- ◇ Reading 2 – One book: The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency⁴

Students were given surveys asking how satisfied they were with the class. This was a list of questions to which they could respond to using a 5-point Likert scale. The scale gave the options: 1. Strongly agree, 2. Agree, 3. Don't know, 4. Disagree, 5. Strongly Disagree.

The following gives the percentage of students who answered 1. Strongly Agree or 2. Agree to the question "Overall, were you satisfied with this class?":

2005/2006 school year

- ◇ Reading 1 – 93% Reading 2 – 96%

2006/2007 school year

- ◇ Reading 1 – 94% Reading 2 – 100%

2007/2008 school year

- ◇ Reading 1 – 92% Reading 2 – 94%

2008/2009 school year

- ◇ Reading 1 – 93% Reading 2 – 81%

2009/2010 school year

- ◇ Reading 1 – 84% Reading 2 – 100%

2010/2011 school year

- ◇ Reading 1 – 100%
- ◇ Reading 2 – Not yet known at time of writing

It can be seen that satisfaction with the Reading 1 class is over 90% every year except for 2009/2010, when it dropped to 84%. This is despite the same content being taught by the same teacher two years in a row.

It can also be seen that satisfaction with Reading 2 was also over 90% every year except for 2008/2009, when it dropped to 81%, again despite the same teacher and same content being used.

It could be surmised that having the same teacher teach a class two years in a row can lead to a less satisfying class on the part of the students. However, with the Reading 2 class, Mr. L's classes in 2005/2006 and in 2006/2007 were also taught by the same teacher two years in a row yet the satisfaction rating was a maximum after two years. There must be an important difference between the class style or content of Mr. L's classes and Mr. S's classes.

Looking more closely at the data and the explanation in the introduction, two important factors are noticed. Firstly, it could be seen that Mr. L was a designer of the linked reading class curriculum (i.e. a stakeholder), and secondly that he also changed the class textbook every year (except in the most recent year). The first factor could have led to Mr. L to want to avoid a failure of the system he helped to create, thus consciously or subconsciously putting in more effort, and the second factor may have resulted in the prevention of complacency and over familiarity with the material (on the part of the teacher) due to using a new book in the classroom. Using a new book could help to avoid over familiarity with the contents and therefore create a feeling of the teacher learning together with the students, instead of instructing from above. Of course, using a new book would lead to a

need for an entire new book-related dictionary to be created from scratch, which takes almost a week of continuous work. The first factor would have led Mr. L to put the effort into this, making the second factor possible.

When Mr. S took over from Mr. L, he read the course design and followed it very closely. However, this was a course design made by somebody else and just handed over to Mr. S, in other words Mr. S was not a real stakeholder in the same way as Mr. B or Mr. L would have been. Furthermore, Mr. S simply continued with the same book used before and also used Mr. L's notes and tests – a very efficient way of working and one which is used in many pre-described courses by teachers taking over from others. However, we can see from the data above that this can result in reduced student satisfaction due to a possible reduction in a feeling of involvement on the part of the teacher.

The data above gives us more information. The satisfaction shown by students after completing Reading 1 was high (over 90%) even after two years of Mr. B teaching, but fell for Mr S. on his second year. Again, we do not think this is the fault of the teacher; it could be for the same reason mentioned before - that Mr. S was not a stakeholder in the creation of the curriculum while Mr B. was.

An interesting point to note is that Mr. H decided to decrease the number of books required to be read to three, citing the workload students had in reading and writing reports. This independent decision comes, in part, from the school atmosphere/ethos where teachers are encouraged to decide things for themselves and are given a lot of freedom (a system which allowed the creation of the linked reading curriculum in the first place). Upon finishing Reading 1, Mr H's students scored his class at the maximum satisfaction rating. This could be an indication that students cope better with a lighter work load. However, it will take time to make a judgement about the long term efficacy of this as having had a lighter work load in Reading 1 may

have not increased the students' reading and (report) writing ability as much as previous years on reaching the Reading 2 class. This could lead to lower student satisfaction regarding the Reading 2 class due to difficulty in keeping up. On the other hand, however, it may lead to greater and quicker adaptation to the quasi-intensive reading style as it is possible that the students read their books more intensively in Reading 1 due to having had more time to do so. Only time will tell.

Another interesting result to wait for is whether using the same book two years in a row in Mr. L's 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 Reading 2 class will result in reduced satisfaction, in the same way as it did with Mr. S. From what we have learned, we can speculate that it will not result in reduced satisfaction as Mr. L is a stakeholder, being one of the designers of the linked reading curriculum.

Once caveat that needs to be remembered by the stakeholders (whoever they turn out to be) is that the linked reading curriculum appears to be evolving beyond what was originally planned and a decision needs to be made regarding what to do about it. It has been shown that the linked reading curriculum can produce good results (Lynch, 2007), but the data above show that changes to the class syllabus may turn out to be beneficial.

5. Conclusions

The number of years that the linked reading program has continued is a tribute to its success. Over 80% of students have indicated their satisfaction with the course every year, with all of the students (100%) being satisfied in some years.

We could see that having teachers become stakeholders, resulting from their in-depth involvement in decision making and curriculum design can result in greater student satisfaction when taught by those teachers.

Changing the book each year could be a way to in-

crease the satisfaction shown by students when taught by non-stakeholders, such as teachers who come from outside. Having that teacher choose the book may result in him/her becoming a stakeholder and show extra benefit.

Finally, with personnel changes bringing in different ways of thinking and new experience, the curriculum should be allowed to evolve when potentially useful ideas are presented. However, we should tread carefully and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, such as teaching only extensive reading which resulted in almost no long term gain for the students (Burke 2006). It could be useful to talk about and redesign the reading curriculum regularly with all the connected teachers being involved as real decision makers, especially when it comes to their own classes. Through this, each teacher would understand the overall picture and the goals of the reading curriculum.

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- 1 Chosen freely from the Oxford Bookworms series, or the Penguin Readers series in the university library. The average level chosen by students was level 2-3 according to surveys/in class work.

- 2 Unabridged American English edition, Roald Dahl, ISBN 0-14-240388-1
 3 Unabridged British English edition, C.S. Lewis, ISBN 0-00-671677-6
 4 Unabridged British English edition, Alexander McCall Smith, ISBN 1-40-003477-9

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