ABSTRACT

In the current era, the typical Japanese university reading class usually includes an extensive reading component. The shape, form, and scope of that extensive reading constituent generally depend on the particular program, department mandates, or the individual teacher’s discretion. Almost all reading classes that have an extensive reading requirement prescribe students to do reading outside the realm of the given class materials and textbooks. In accordance with many extensive reading core principles, most of that reading is left up to the individual student to undertake on his or her own, and then record that reading in one manner or another, and also perhaps participate in other activities such as presentations or written reports. In addition to these fundamental extensive reading class procedures, the supplemental use of graded reader sets can enhance and augment learning, and hopefully stimulate students’ interest in books. This paper will outline methods of teaching and assessing graded reader sets, as well as elaborate on the benefits that both students and teachers receive by utilizing them.

1 Introduction

The supplemental use of graded reader sets within an extensive reading curriculum can facilitate a multitude of benefits for students. Even if teachers choose to just intermittently use graded reader sets, or employ them only at the beginning of the year, students profit from this learning experience and can apply the range of skills they develop to their individual extensive reading. Under the direction and encouragement of their teacher, students can learn how to consider...
the historical and cultural contexts of stories, recognize irony, symbolism, and authors’ writing styles, analyze, synthesize, and holistically evaluate a story, and through various activities, develop their critical thinking skills. Teachers are not spoon-feeding students, but rather piquing their intellect and sparking their imaginations. Perhaps most importantly of all, through this collective reading and learning process, students will hopefully discover the enjoyment and intellectual stimulation of reading. When teachers share the reading experience together with students, they can create an atmosphere that promotes both the value and pleasure of the written word. (Henry, cited in Bamford and Day, 2002)

The student body in this context is non-English major, first year Japanese university students, and the curriculum includes *Reading For Speed and Fluency Books I and II* (Paul Nation and Casey Malarcher, Compass Publishing) as well *Read This! Book II* (Daphne Mackey and Alice Savage, Cambridge) for intensive reading work. The following outline of how to implement graded reader sets is particularly useful in that it is highly flexible and adaptive to any reading level; teachers can tailor the activities that appeal to them to their own teaching styles and student body.

### 2 Choosing the Graded Reader Set

The first time that teachers use a graded reader set in their classes, it is imperative that they choose a book that their students can easily handle. The goal is to make sure that the students can process the text fluently, and that reading the book does not become a study activity (Nation and Waring, 2004, p. 13) or worse, an exercise in frustration. Making a conservative, level appropriate choice from the beginning assists instructors in building student confidence, assessing their students’ exact reading levels, and establishing structure, form, and rhythm for teaching future reader sets. After the initial graded reader unit, teachers can incrementally increase difficulty level as appropriate. Teachers should definitely make a point to read the *entire* reader before deciding to use it. Although they may know and like a given title, that particular version may be confusing, poorly written, bland, or undesirable for other reasons. The ideal time to discover that you are dissatisfied with a reader is before you choose it, not midway through the book. It is also useful to check the backs of readers; there are often glossaries and various useful reading activities that may add to the appeal of a given book. In any
case, whatever readers you choose for your classes, make sure that they are books in which you have a personal interest or passion. If you love to teach the book, your students may hopefully come to love it too; teachers create a positive learning environment by showing passion for their subject matter. (Bulger, et al., 2002)

The teacher’s energy and enthusiasm for the story are perhaps the most important factors in stimulating student interest in the book.

3 Introducing the Book to Students

First, establish the setting of the story and explore any relevant historical and cultural contexts with students. There are many ways to achieve this aim; this instructor generally employs a blend of short lecture and note taking, discussion prompts, and/or timeline activities, which can be done in pairs or as a large group. After familiarizing students with the basic background, distribute the books and then read aloud the back cover and opening notes or prologue with the students. Stop often and elaborate on key points. Dramatize it for them. Make sure that students understand the particular setting, historical background, and any other contexts key to understanding the story. Teachers should allot sufficient class time to properly introduce books that require more than just a perfunctory understanding of context. The time and effort expended on these initial activities will pay dividends for students as they read.

4 Getting started

Read the first chapter aloud to the students, while they follow along in their books. Teachers should be stopping and prompting often, emphasizing important information and details, and confirming the students’ understanding. Reading aloud also models intonation, pronunciation, flow, and other components of diction. When deemed appropriate, have students make character lists in their notebooks. These lists can consist of simply each character’s name and identity in the story, and perhaps some basic pertinent information about them. This instructor has found that character lists (and other uses of student notebooks) greatly aid overall student comprehension and help avoid confusion. Reading teachers—including this one—often misjudge how easy it is for students to get
mixed-up, mistake characters, or fail to make important connections between characters and events. The notebooks really help students organize the characters and events of a story. If time allows, read chapter two together, or assign sustained silent reading (SSR) of the second chapter, encouraging students to continue adding to their character lists. Providing SSR for students is a solid teaching strategy that encourages students to read more (Takase, 2008, p. 132), and also gives the teacher a chance to observe the students’ various reading speeds and concentration levels.

5 Homework

Decide in advance the time frame in which you would like the students to read the book, and then construct reading assignments, activities, class work, and quizzes around that. Consider incorporating the use of student notebooks into homework; for example, teachers can have students expand their character lists, take notes on chapters, or write individual chapter summaries with strict word limits. In certain circumstances, you may want to suggest that students read each chapter twice: the first time straight through without stopping, doing their best to comprehend, and the second time slowly and thoroughly, stopping where necessary to confirm their understanding. Finally, give students tips on how to effectively review: for example, you can advise students to go through each chapter title and any accompanying illustrations, and connect the events of that chapter to the title. In the case where readers have chapter review questions in the back, encourage students to quiz themselves.

6 Assessment

6.1 Reading Quizzes

Depending on the length and difficulty level of the book, giving regular or intermittent reading quizzes is an excellent way of encouraging students to do the assigned reading. Furthermore, the teacher has the option of allowing students to access their notebooks during the quiz (either announced beforehand or unannounced), which encourages students to do a thorough job of whatever the teacher asks of them. This instructor was really impressed with some of
the fine work his students did individually in their notebooks *after* giving the first unannounced open notebook quiz. Conducting short reading quizzes also gives the instructor an additional mode of assessment. This type of reading quiz should ask only factual questions (such as what happened) and avoid interpretive questions. In order to help the students, keep all the questions in chronological order. At this point, the focus is on student accountability and rewarding their effort, not on interpretive prowess.

### 6.2 Review Activity for Tests

When the time comes to give the final test on the reader, review activities that allow the students to both refresh their memories and express themselves in spoken English are pragmatic and engaging. This instructor often introduces a pair work activity to the students; the following is an optional activity that teachers can alter or modify as they see fit. Put students in pairs and instruct them on how to give chapter summaries using only the chapter titles and illustrations as guides. Modeling this activity for students before setting them off on their own is essential. Teachers should demonstrate by presenting a concise summary of the first chapter, and perhaps even the first two chapters, depending on the ability level of the students. After each chapter you present, point out why that was an appropriate and effective summary (only the most pertinent information is stated, and minor details are omitted). For lower level classes you may want to give them a written printout of the example summaries. Another option is that you allow only one book to be used between the two students; therefore, one student is looking at the book and summarizing and the other is listening, and when appropriate, responds or gives help to the presenter. This review activity serves to (1) refresh the major events of the story and give students a holistic review, (2) provide an excellent opportunity to practice spoken English, (3) teach and foster the skill of summarizing, and (4) allows the students to ask questions and get help from the teacher. During the activity time, the teacher stays active and attentive, walking around and listening, and chiming in or giving help where needed.

### 6.3 Final Test

The final test presents an opportunity for the instructor to achieve a number of worthy educational goals including: (1) giving students the opportunity to develop
and express their critical thinking skills through writing, (2) having students apply the skills they have acquired in outside writing classes, or if they have not had a writing course, you can introduce them to the basics of paragraph writing, and provide them with an avenue to get meaningful practice, and (3) encouraging students to think creatively, and then express that creativity through writing.

On the final test, aside from any factual short answer questions that may appear, this instructor typically asks two or three open-ended questions that students answer in a single paragraph each: one will require critical thinking and/or analysis, one may be purely factual, such as a summary, and the other may be mainly creative in substance. Naturally, both critical and creative thinking questions require students to use supporting information that includes both their own intelligent thoughts and information from the story. Teachers should explain to students that on essay questions there are no right and wrong answers in the traditional sense, but rather they are being evaluated on how well they express and support their viewpoints. The time allotted is usually 45 minutes, but that can be adjusted as needed. Students are allowed to use dictionaries, but they are not absolutely necessary. These type of open-ended questions are not just vehicles of assessment; over time they develop in students the ability to look more deeply into the books they are reading, make critical assessments and interpretations while they are reading, and also express themselves through writing.

Of course, the possibilities for creating open-ended questions are virtually endless. Here are a few examples that the author uses on his final tests. Hopefully, teachers can use them to spark their own ideas. First, here are two examples of questions that are factual in nature: (1) Choose one of the following chapter titles (give students a choice of several titles) and in a paragraph summarize the main events of that chapter. (2) Tell the events of (choose a main event, episode, or chapter title of the book) from Xxxx’s point of view. Next, here are some general examples of critical thinking or creative type questions: (1) What do you think is the most important theme (author’s message) of the book? Use both information from the story and your own intelligent thoughts to support your view. (2) Choose an original title for this book, and using events and episodes from the story, explain why you chose your title. (3) Imagine you were in a similar situation as (character’s name). Explain what you would do and why. (4) What do you think (“choose a notable quotation”) means? Again, these examples are just very broad illustrations
of the types of open-ended questions that are efficacious for stimulating students’ thinking and intellect. At first, some students will find these types of questions quite difficult, and may initially be at a loss simply because they are not used to being challenged in this manner. However, with encouragement from their teacher and experience over time, the majority of them will make progress and be able to write paragraph answers expressing their thoughts and ideas.

7 Conclusion

Reading teachers can foster in students the capacity to understand and interpret literature far beyond what they could achieve solely on their own. By introducing graded reader sets, instructors can teach and guide students how to better process and evaluate everything they read. Students can utilize the thinking and assessment skills they develop through this learning process in their individual extensive reading, and hopefully in all their future reading. The supplemental use of graded reader sets can be an effective classroom tool for boosting students’ overall comprehension and interpretive skills, and motivating them to read more.

References


