Cooperation of Two Extensive Reading Programs in Japan and Vietnam: Students' Exchange Activities for Motivating the Students to Read Autonomously

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Abstract

English has been and still is a major disturbing barrier for engineering students, who will to work globally, in some Asian countries such as Japan and Vietnam, where English is learned as a foreign language (EFL). Because the language learning is not the students' major purpose and English is not used outside the classroom, the students lack the exposure to the target language necessary to master the very basic language skills. Extensive reading (ER) is proposed as a solution and some ER programs are successfully conducted in Japan. However, ER in EFL settings needs large amount read until the learners recognize the improvement in their language skills, and ER programs need longer duration than the ones in ESL settings. Thus, motivating the learners during the long period becomes a new challenge for ER programs. This paper describes the cooperation of two ER programs in motivating the students through the students' exchange activities. Although the exchange activities majorly used productive language skills such as speaking and writing, they encouraged out-of-class reading, as the reading materials were common content in both student groups. Students' exchange activities proved to be effective additions to the ER programs as students' autonomous out-of-class reading was a key to success in long-term ER programs.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL), Extensive reading (ER), Students' exchange activities

1. Introduction

This paper describes the cooperation of two educational institutions which tried to improve the students' English skills based on Extensive reading (ER) program conducted in each institution. ER is a learning approach of a language where the learners read a huge amount of comprehensible texts in the target language [1] and improve their language skills from the cumulated inputs in a long run, which is a common approach in learning any native language and is often practiced in learning English as a second language (ESL). ER is also proposed as an effective approach in learning English as a foreign language (EFL), where English is not used outside the classroom. According to an ER program successfully conducted in a Japanese college of technology [2], ER program needed longer duration than three years to improve the students' language skills until the improvement was recognizable, because the students' initial language skills were as low as elementary level, and the students had very little exposure to the target language other than their ER in an EFL setting. Motivating the students during the long period had greater importance in EFL settings.

The two long-term ER programs in Japan and Vietnam have been trying to motivate their students to read English books continuously by providing the two groups of students with the opportunities to exchange their learning experience and information to each other. The combination of ER and students' exchange activities was expected to improve their language skills to higher levels, which might not be achieved by an independent ER program or a single student exchange program.

2. Difficulties of EFL Learners

2.1 Difficulties of Japanese Engineering Students

Japanese learners' English proficiency is quite low as is shown in the TOEIC scores [3]. The institutional program of the TOEIC showed that 62% of the test-takers belonged to the score zone of beginner or elementary levels (10 - 490) and the average scores of Japanese students major in science, engineering and agriculture stayed from 416 for the first year students to 432 for the forth year students, which were far lower than the average expected score of 550 for fresh employees of major companies. The situation has been the same for more than a decade but the current gap is serious for engineering students in this century because they are expected to have fundamental language skills to work globally but do not have them.

A major reason of Japanese students' lower TOEIC scores is their lower fluency in reading and listening, which prevents them from using their knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary in any language activities. Because Japanese learners do not use English in daily life, they have little experience of actually reading English texts without translation or of listening English narrations with instant comprehension. Their *reading* often means translating English texts into Japanese ones word by word, and they do not believe it possible that they are able to comprehend English texts without translation. Conversation in English is often disturbed because they hardly comprehend what they are told. When they need to *speak* in English conversation classes, they simply repeat the known patterns or struggle to translate their idea from Japanese into English on the spot, resulting mostly in uttering a few words but not a sentence. Stephens [4] had observed the mental struggle of her students when responding to her in English, and speculated that this was

because of the preponderance of the *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) method in their formative years of learning English. Lower fluency of typical Japanese EFL learners is caused by their lack of actual reading and listening experience.

We know that even elementary EFL learners improved their language skills to the expected level when they learn in an ESL setting for a certain period. For example, 99 third-year NIT students who stayed in English speaking countries for ten months scored 614 in average when they took the TOEIC tests just after their studying abroad [5]. Interview to the students revealed, however, that they experienced about three months' *silent period* before they started to comprehend what they were told in English. It suggested that shorter stays in ESL settings had hardly little influence on the students' language skills. Such short stays in ESL settings were often supported as the valuable events to motivate students to learn earnestly after the stay, but we observed many *motivated* students lost their enthusiasm of learning English in a few weeks after their studying abroad. Since it was not feasible to send all the students abroad for ten months, the alternative, setting up a virtual ESL environment, seemed to be worth to consider, where students actually used English for a certain time of their days without any intervention of Japanese.

The first challenge for a virtual ESL environment in EFL settings was the large amount of learners' exposure to the language. Since elementary EFL learners needed at least several hundred hours of language exposure to improve their skills to intermediate levels, the necessary time would consume almost all the lesson time allocated to language learning in most institutions if the students could not be exposed to the language outside the classroom. The environment must integrate the learning activities both in and out of the lessons. Cost might be an additional barrier if we chose conversation lessons, especially of small class size, as the means of language exposure. They were simply too expensive to most learners. Conversation lessons of larger class size easily lost their effectiveness as the means of language exposure because of the students' longer waiting time in the lessons.

The second challenge was the dependency of productive language skills such as speaking and writing on receptive language skills such as listening and reading. Simply said, we could not speak without sufficient listening skills, nor write without reading skills. Because elementary learners did not have sufficient receptive language skills, it was not constructive to force them to speak or write. The virtual environment must ensure rich language exposure for elementary learners as comprehensible inputs, the rarely adopted means of English education in Japanese schools.

2.2 Difficulties of Vietnamese Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Students

Since the launch of Renovation policy in 1986, Vietnam has attempted to accelerate many economic, political and educational reforms, and has widely opened toward the outside world in the era of globalization. English, which is considered as a world language, thus has gained its privilege in Vietnam and has become the most popular foreign language in the economic, political, and educational areas. Within the Vietnamese educational system, English has been a compulsory subject from grade 6 to grade 12, and at tertiary level, all universities require students to achieve a minimum level of international English language proficiency to meet graduation requirements. Although Vietnamese students spend at least 7 years learning English, their English proficiency is not high. According to the 2015 EF English Proficiency Index, Vietnam was listed among the group of countries which had moderate English proficiency with a score of 53.81 [6]. Additionally, as shown in the 2014 ETS Report on worldwide TOEIC Listening and Reading test-takers, the Mean TOEIC scores of Vietnamese test-takers was 478 [7]. 70% of test-takers were between 21 and 25 years old, and only 32% of test-takers claimed to spend 11 to 20% of their daily life using English [7]. The general required TOEIC scores for graduation in most universities range from 400 to 450, which are quite low in comparison with the average score 550 in global scale.

In fact, with the heavy burden of achieving the required TOEIC scores for graduation, many Vietnamese university students are expected to acquire as much grammar and vocabulary as possible, and they are given almost no chance to practise their speaking skills during school lessons. Therefore, most of them are good at English grammar, but they cannot use English meaningfully and successfully for communication and for their careers. Generally, a reason for this issue is that the Vietnamese educational system primarily focuses on teaching to the test, which means teachers are under extreme pressure to get their students to pass grammar-oriented finals and entrance exams. As a result, most Vietnamese teachers employ the Grammar-Translation Method which has dominated English language teaching system in Vietnam, with its exclusive emphasis on the language's grammar rules and word-for-word translation. There are also other factors influencing students' English learning, including little exposure to English-speaking environments outside the classroom and an emphasis on rote learning of an array of rules and structures. Consequently, Vietnamese students have few or almost no opportunities to genuinely practice English beyond classes, and they tend to translate word by word when reading due to the habits of memorization and repetition generated from rote learning. Most students' English skills stop at rudimentary levels with basic grammar and simple vocabulary, and they are not fully equipped with necessary language skills to achieve much higher levels of English proficiency.

The situation is even more challenging for non-English major students such as ICT students because of insufficient instructional time allotted to English. According to the curricular English program at University of Information Technology (UIT), there are three main English courses for students, which in total is equivalent to only 180 periods of 45 minutes. Plus, with its specialization in ICT fields, the university prioritizes its funding on ICT facilities over English materials, which hence limits those non-English major students to an English learning environment with poor facilities and poor resources of authentic English materials. Despite their needs of developing all language skills, especially reading skills to read English academic materials of their majors, the students are mechanically put under pressure to perform well in their English exams rather than enjoying English and becoming autonomous EFL learners.

3. ER Programs

3.1 ER Program at NIT, Toyota College

ER had been introduced as a learning approach to ensure (comprehensible) inputs [1], which was expected to compensate the EFL learners' lack in exposure to the target language. Studies in EFL settings showed various benefits of ER, such as higher reading comprehension [8], improving attitude to reading [9], and improving reading fluency [10]. Practices in colleges of Technology in EFL settings, however, found that their ER programs needed long-term duration as the effect of ER on standardized test scores such as TOEIC occurred after the students had read sub-million total words of English texts [2]. Guiding the students to read such an amount required rich libraries of easy-to-read English books, regular reading time, and colleagues to share the reading experience.

ER at NIT, Toyota College has been conducted as the combination of a three-year long program for all the first through third year students, and a six-year long program starting at the second year of the Electrical and Electronic (E&E) Engineering department, resulting a nine-credited seven-year long program for E&E students since 2008 [5]. One credit is assigned to a series of 45-minute lessons for 30 weeks through the year. The students use almost all the lesson time to read easy-to-read English books silently, sometimes simultaneously listening to the narrated story so as to avoid analyzing the sentences grammatically or to avoid translating the English text into Japanese. The students select their books from the rich library of easy-to-read books, whose genres and readability levels are different from student to student. They record their reading histories in logbooks, which are collected a few days before each lesson and returned at the beginning of the lesson with some comments from the instructors. They are strongly recommended to read also outside the classroom, and the average total words read during a year are ranging from 150 thousand words to 300 thousand words per year. They are evaluated by two reading comprehension tests per year, whose text lengths and readability levels increase with students' reading experience from the second year to the seventh year [11].

Typical students read a million total words of English texts with several hundred books until the fourth year of the ER program, become to feel some ease when they read easy English books, and increase the TOEIC scores to 400 or higher [5]. After reading more than a million total words, senior students are ready to start speaking and writing their ideas in English. They are eager to join international activities in the form of internships, hand-made robot competitions, or academic conferences, too. However, they sometimes enter the stage of fatigue in their third through fifth year, where some students are easily demotivated because even after reading sub-million total words they don't feel confidence in their language skills and their TOEIC scores do not start to increase yet. They may need extra cares to be motivated to read continuously until they read more than a million total words and experience the breakthrough in their language skills.

3.2 ER Program at UIT-VNU Ho Chi Minh

Among the four fundamental language skills for English, reading has long been recognized as an essential skill that attracts students' attention the most for its applicability to other content-based subjects for higher academic attainment. Especially for ICT students, they need to improve their English reading proficiency to read a wide variety of materials in English for their specialized degrees. Therefore, the implementation of an ER program can help the students achieve good reading fluency since ER aims at encouraging students to rapidly read book after book with a focus on the text content, not language forms, so that they can attain enjoyment in reading and develop reading ability [1].

ER, however, is still a new learning approach to many Vietnamese teachers of English. ER is also reluctantly integrated into the national foreign language curriculum mainly due to its high requirements on book resources, which can cost much money for a large quantity of books and other printed reading materials. Another reason for the lack of ER implementation in Vietnam is that ER promotes student-centered approaches that enable students to become more independent in their language learning and learn English more autonomously outside the classroom. Meanwhile, the English language teaching system in Vietnam has traditionally put heavy emphasis on teacher-centered approaches and testing system which focuses on "teaching to the test" methods.

English language teaching and learning at UIT definitely has followed the conventional national language teaching policy, and there have been few outside-the-classroom activities for students to use English effectively. As an attempt to make language teaching reforms at UIT, the Joint ER program with NIT, Toyota College has been conducted as an extra-curricular activity for students to practice English reading beyond schools. However, there are many difficult challenges during the ER implementation. Firstly, the university's library only provides students with the English course books for their curricular English program and does not have other kinds of English books, such as picture books or graded readers, for student to practice extensive reading outside the classroom. Realizing such difficulty, NIT, Toyota College has lent UIT a good number of graded readers for two years. Moreover, as the UIT's English curriculum has to strictly follow the Department of English's programs, it is almost impossible to integrate ER into the official curriculum. As a result, the ER program is not mandatory but an outside-the-classroom English program which calls for students' voluntary participation. In the first phase of the program starting in January 2016, there are 42 first-year students from elementary to pre-intermediate English levels agreeing to join the ER program within two consecutive academic school years. The students are constantly encouraged to read a number of graded readers on the basis of level of difficulty outside the classroom; more importantly, they are expected to read at least two books per week. They select their books which fit their interests and English proficiency, and they can also consult the teacher about books' genres and readability levels to choose appropriate ones. Each student is distributed one reading journal to record their reading progress. The students are supposed to meet the teacher once a week to borrow books and to submit their reading

journals for the teacher's either oral or written feedback. Besides, there is one ER meeting for every two weeks so that the students can discuss with their peers about their reading progress and their favorite books. Followed the structure of the ER program at NIT, Toyota College, the ER program at UIT also expects the students to read from 150 thousand words to 300 thousand words per year, and conducts a reading comprehension test at the end of each semester to evaluate students' reading levels.

After the first four months of the ER implementation, the students show positive attitudes toward ER in English and develop their reading autonomy, which can be seen from the generally increasing trend of the number of books they borrow each week. Students of better English proficiency are more motivated to read English books, and their books' readability levels gradually shift to higher levels. Meanwhile, many students of lower English proficiency read exactly two books per week as required, and they need extra encouragement from the teacher to maintain their reading progress on track.

4. Joint Project

4.1 Student Exchange for ER

Japanese students and Vietnamese students share the reading material, English books for ER and the language, English between them other than their common interest in engineering, science, technology, and culture of both countries. Because of this shared interests, the information exchange between two groups of students is easier than the other cases even if they feel a slight difficulty in using English as the means of communication. And because of this slight difficulty, the students recognize the need of learning English and are motivated to read more earnestly. The Student Exchange Program, in which NIT students are planning to visit UIT campus in March 2018, is also expected to enhance the enthusiasm of both Japanese and Vietnamese students for ER.

4.2 Tadoku Forum

The Tadoku Forum [12] has become a social place for students of two universities to exchange information and discuss about different topics varying from reading skills and books to engineering majors and cultures. Students of both universities are expected to join each discussion and share their learning experience. Especially for the Vietnamese students, because they still have little experience on ER, they are interested in topics about reading, such as one's favorite books and reading techniques. Interestingly, the Japanese and Vietnamese students are excited about the Student Exchange program next year, so there are many topics about cultures of Vietnam and Japan created in the forum. The students also discuss enthusiastically about their majors, especially about robot engineering. The forum not only provides the students opportunities to communicate with others in English but also allows them to share their extensive reading experiences for further reading development.

Table 1 shows a series of attractive topics on the Tadoku Forum. The topic showed "Why don't you talk about ROBOKON" and "What is your favorite book?" are the most popular topics on the discussion boards of the forum. There are 33 posts and 394 views on that topic, and 9 Vietnamese students, 3 Japanese students, and 2 Japanese teachers responded during four months. It is expected to have more topics about ER on the Tadoku Forum to enhance interaction among students and to let them interchange their ER experience and reading practice.

The following articles or conversations are examples of how encouragement or motivating others were accomplished on the discussion board "What is your favorite book" (*where JT represents Japanese teacher, VSs are Vietnamese Students, and JSs are Japanese students*). A Japanese teacher posted this topic and let the students of Japanese and Vietnamese exchange books' information, their experiences, and feelings about extensive reading each other. He also presented some advices for them to select books to read.

- **Conversation Example 1:**

JT-1: *"Would you like to write about your favorite books? Some of your friends may like the book, too. Let us exchange such information to each other because finding books you love to read is one of the key motivating factors in Tadoku or extensive reading (ER). ･･･"*

VS-1: *"The kind of book I like most is detective story. I also like story about horror or ghost. What books can I read about detective, horror or ghost? I think reading my favorite books can help to remember new words longer. I hope so."*

JS-1: *"Hi, VS-1. hmm...I like detective stories, too. And I'll introduce "Cam Jansen" series. "Cam Jansen", she has great memory. ･･･ Before reading this series, you have to read "Young Cam Jansen" in Puffin Easy to Read series. They're story when she was a primary (But no Serious incident...). I don't read horror story, so I can not adequately help you."*

- **Conversation Example 2:**

JT-1: *"Do you know many books have "genre" displayed on the back cover with the abstract of the story and other information? "Murder Mystery", "Thriller", and "Criminal" are the keywords that are related to mysteries. Among the books we sent from Toyota, Cengage Pageturners (CPT) series have several mysteries, and "White Death", "The President's Murderer", "Chemical Secret" in Oxford Bookworms series(OBW), ･･･ "Bad Love", "Inspector Logan", "Dead Cold" are mysteries, too. I hope you enjoy those mysteries."*

VS-2: *"I LIKE it! I mean I like "Dead Cold" very much. My teacher recommended me that title. I gave it 5 stars. Oh sorry, I was enchanted :)) Another thriller I gave 5 stars is "1984". I just could not put it down until finished*

reading it. *I will seek for your recommendation next week.*"

VS-1: "*Hi, JT-1. Thanks for introducing me about a lot of interesting books. It helps me a lot to find my favorite book. Now I'm reading Cengage Pageturners (CPT) series and I really love this series. I gonna read "Three Tales of Deadly Desire". I think it's very mysterious.*"

JS-2: "*I like CPT series! This series have story of school life about quarrel with friends story, love story, etc. I don't like extreme books like Murder case and using words are not difficult, so easy to read for me. When you tired to read extreme story, I recommend this series.*"

- **Conversation Example 3:**

VS-3: "*For me, I like Oxford Reading Tree. Its stories are very easy to understand and the pictures are very nice. It always makes me relaxed. I also like Oxford Bookworms Library because I like detective stories. The stories are very interesting and make me feel excited. I have borrowed 2 books of Oxford Bookworms Library series to read in the holiday.*"

JS-2: "*Hi VS-2! Nice to meet you! I like ORT series too. When I started doing tadoku, I have read this series. Every stories are peaceful. So I can read calmly. If you read all books of ORT, how about ORT10 and 11? These series appear grown characters. Of course pictures are cute!*"

Table 1: *The List of Topics on the Tadoku Forum (cited on 2016/05/04)*

Topics	Number of Replies	Number of Views	Day of Last Post
What is your favorite book?	32	394	2016/05/04
Facts about NIT-Toyota	25	291	2016/05/03
Why don't you talk about ROBOKON?	39	389	2016/05/01
Where should you go when traveling in Viet Nam?	2	50	2016/04/26
About Vietnamese Food.	16	115	2016/04/26
Question room of culture, etc.	9	120	2016/04/19
Some of videos about both Vietnam and Japan	1	24	2016/04/17
How to read a book.	6	63	2016/04/11
Introduce your Japanese Pets	1	18	2016/04/7
Maybe helpful websites for all :)	2	47	2016/04/02
About Japanese food	23	279	2016/03/30
Hello from UIT students	11	141	2016/03/15
Welcome to the UIT-VNUHCM and NIT-Toyota Group-Forum!	5	141	2015/12/27
Some information about UIT-HCM	0	52	2015/12/20

4.3 Book-talk in English

Book-talk conducted in this project is an aural activity in a small group of students. They try to introduce to each other one of the stories from the books they have read in the recent weeks. One session consists of a three-minute talk of one member and the following Q&As among all the members, typically in three minutes. If a group has three members, one round needs 20 minutes or fewer. Typical EFL learner feels three minutes a long time to speak English sentences continuously at first, but he gradually starts to feel it too short to present a meaningful story. Anyway a talk is interrupted by the limited time, so the students are advised to start talking from conclusion and then to move towards the detail or circumstance for minimizing the damage from the interruption.

In the ER program of NIT, Toyota book-talk was tried in the lessons of from third to seventh year students in 2013. It was welcomed by the sixth and seventh year students, admitted by many of the fourth and fifth year students, but disliked by most of the third year students. For the third year students, whose TOEIC scores were lower than 450, it was too hard to utter a meaningful sentence in a limited time as a talker, and the listeners were frustrated for the long waiting time. According to the responses of the students in the former year we adjusted the frequency of the book-talk to none for the third year students, once in a few months for the fourth and fifth year students, and every week for the sixth and seventh year students in 2014.

The sixth or seventh year students liked book-talks because they felt more reality than other conversation lessons as the talker. The talking content was more meaningful than just exchanging greetings or patterned sentences but their genuine ideas or unknown information to the listeners. The activity revealed the fact that Japanese EFL learners in elementary or lower-intermediate levels could not make a meaningful speech as long as he translated his ideas from Japanese to English on the spot, and the activity also encouraged the student to read with more comprehension so he was ready to his presentation. As the result, the students tended to recognize the limit of translation, and to start selecting easier books for deeper comprehension or searching more interesting books in their ER. Book-talk became a good motivator of ER for intermediate learners.

Since book-talk was confirmed to be a hard task for elementary learners, we have removed book-talk from

mandatory work in regular lessons for the third year students, and have set it up as an elective out-of-class activity since the autumn semester of 2015. To this activity, we invited the students who had read more than a million total words of English texts in their ER and were ready to book-talks. Thus conducted book-talk confirmed that the students could enjoy and be benefitted from the activity as their elder students did. As they proceeded into the fourth year in 2016, they still continued to attend the book-talk activity in every Friday evening and started to invite their classmates to join the group. Book-talk is planning to be a main activity in the Student Exchange Program, too.

5. Conclusion

Extensive reading (ER) is an effective approach of learning languages, but ER programs in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings need longer duration until the learners recognize their improved language skills by themselves, and motivating the students during the long period is a major challenge. Two ER programs in Japan and Vietnam set up the Student Exchange Program and students' exchange activities on the web to motivate the students in both countries. Although students majorly used productive language skills in the activities such as speaking and writing, the activities encouraged the students' out-of-class reading, which used receptive language skills, and they proved to be effective additions to the programs. The combination of ER and students' exchange activities are working well and are expected to become a prelude to further cooperation of two institutions.

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Biography

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