

Reading Journal: Its Benefits for Extensive Reading

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Abstract

This is a preliminary study, which aimed to investigate EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students' opinions on the benefits of reading journal for Reading I, an extensive reading course for first year intermediate proficient students. It was limited only to finding out students' opinions on whether or not the reading journal could and how it could motivate students to read, enable them to understand the main ideas and important details of the reading materials, and enable them to think critically. A six-item questionnaire was designed to elicit responses from the students about their opinions on the use of the reading journal. Implications to EFL language learning specifically, and teaching and learning generally are discussed.

Key Words: Extensive reading, reading, language learning, learning strategy, reading journal, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

Introduction

1. Extensive Reading

At the most basic level, reading is the recognition of words, from simple recognition of the individual letters and how these letters form a particular word to what each word means not just on an individual level, but as part of a text (Tennant, 2013). The ability to read is acknowledged to be the most stable and durable of the second language modalities (Bernhardt, 1991). This means that learners may use their productive skills, yet still be able to comprehend texts with some degree of proficiency. To get a maximum benefit from their reading, students need to be involved in both extensive and intensive reading (Harmer, 2007). The focus of this paper, however, is limited only to extensive reading.

In extensive reading, students silently read large quantities of materials. These materials are usually at a level that permits students to gain at least a fair understanding of what they are reading without outside help (Jacobs & Gallo, 2002). These large quantities of reading materials provide large amounts of comprehensible input in students' new language in order to make progress toward overall command of that language (Krashen, 1982). This does not only benefit reading proficiency but overall language proficiency as well. Other characteristics generally thought to be among the most important for making extensive reading successful include (Campbell, 1989; Davis, 1995; Bamford & Day, 1997): 1) Students choose what they want to read; 2) Students take part in post-reading activities; 3) Teachers read with their students, thus serving as role models of good readers; 4) Teachers and students keep track of student progress; and 5) Teachers provide help and guidance where needed. All these characteristics were taken into account in the reading course where this research was conducted, and focused mainly on teachers and students keeping track of student progress, specifically using the reading journal.

2. The Reading Journal

The journal log model suggested by Lyutaya (2011) was utilized in the reading journal used in this study. The reading journal in this study consists of six parts, namely: (1) Title of the book, text or article, (2) Prediction of content based on the title, (3) An intriguing sentence or passage, (4) Inferential or critical questions, (5) Opinion about the story, and (6) Summary or plot. For the first part, students simply wrote the title of the book, text or any article they chose to read. The purpose of this was to simply identify what the students chose to read which enabled both the students and the teacher to understand better the rest of the contents of the journal. For prediction of content based on the title, students had to indicate what came to their mind upon seeing the title cover of the reading material.

Predicting is a common pre-reading technique to activate background knowledge, focus the reader's attention, set the mood of the story, and establish a purpose for reading. Readers can often predict the content of a story by looking at the title or chapter headings, scanning the table of contents, and reviewing any pictures, tables, figures, or graphs. Other ways to predict content include reading the blurb on the cover, the introductory paragraphs, or the short excerpts from the text. The information gleaned from these activities may reveal much about the content and make reading easier and meaning more accessible, especially if the information awakens a student's own background knowledge or experience with the subject matter. Even if the predictions are wrong, the reader will be curious and want to start reading to check his or her predictions. In the third part, which is an intriguing sentence or passage, as a during-reading activity, students had to write down part of the text that contained an intriguing idea or puzzling situation, whether it was a sentence or a longer passage, and then interpreted the idea or situation by writing extended comments.

In the inferential or critical question part, when students had questions about something in the story, they had to write them down with possible answers or solutions; later, they could see whether the author or writer gave the same answer or solution. Students learned to ask diverse questions, including (1) inferential questions that entail analyzing facts and reading between the lines to make logical suppositions regarding subtle meaning or the true point of view of a character, and (2) critical questions that are evaluations that readers make based on their values and experiences. Critical questions concern "whether certain topics should have been included, whether the arguments the author makes are valid, whether the writing is biased or objective" (McKenna & Stahl, 2003). In the opinion part, students simply had to write comments by answering the two questions: "What I did not like about the story" and "What I liked about the story. Finally, in the summary, students had to write a three- to five-sentence summary of the reading material.

The reading journal of each student was saved to Dropbox, a free software tool that allows anyone to synchronize files across home and office computers, smartphones, and tablets. A reading journal was created on Dropbox where each student saved his or her reading journal.

Brief Explanation of the Reading Curriculum

TOEFL ITP test has been used by our Department to measure the classroom achievement of our students. Moreover, the overall scores are utilized to group students into high, average and low groups for our courses. The test is conducted in April, July and January for first year students, and only twice for second year, that is, in April and July. Why TOEFL? In Japan or in many other countries, people associate TOEFL to studying in the universities in the U.S. However, the purpose of TOEFL goes beyond admission in the English-language learning programs in the U.S.

TOEFL test measures student's ability to use and understand English at the university level. And it evaluates how well student combines his or her listening, reading, speaking and writing skills to perform academic tasks. We believe that if our students can successfully accomplish the academic tasks, they can also successfully function in the real world where English is used. Extensive reading, specifically the use of the Reading Journal is included in the reading curriculum of our Department with the main goal of improving the TOEFL reading scores of our students.

3. Purpose of the Study

This is a preliminary study, which aimed to investigate EFL students' opinions on the benefits of the reading journal. It was limited only to finding out students' opinions on whether or not the reading journal could and how it could motivate students to read, enable them to understand the main idea and important details of the reading materials, and enable them to think critically. It was assumed that if all of these were achieved, students would be able to get better scores in the TOEFL test.

Method

Sixteen Japanese college students, who were identified as average proficient learners, were involved in this study. Average proficient learners means these students got the total score between 401 and 449 in the TOEFL ITP test. Based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines, these students are able to understand conventional narrative and descriptive texts with a clear underlying structure though their comprehension may be uneven.

The texts they read predominantly contain high-frequency vocabulary and structures. They understand the main ideas, and some supporting details. Their comprehension may often derive primarily from situational and subject-matter knowledge. Students at this level will be challenged to comprehend more complex texts. At the time when the study was conducted, the student participants were taking Reading I, a reading course offered for first years students who major in English language. In this course, students met twice a week, for 90 minutes each meeting. The following was the schedule of the Reading I course, emphasizing on the use of the reading journal.

1. Week 1 (1st meeting): Course introduction, including how to use the reading journal and the reading journal rubrics. Reading sources were also introduced to them, such as the graded readers, which are available at the university library.
2. Week 1 (2nd meeting): More practice activities on how to use the reading journal. Each student borrowed a graded reader at the library and chose an academic article from the TOEFL book. Students were instructed to start reading the graded reader and the TOEFL reading article of their choice. They did not need to finish reading both reading materials, however, they were expected to bring these reading materials with them to the next class meeting.
3. Week 2 (3rd meeting): Silent reading. Students were given 30 minutes to continue reading silently their reading materials. Then they were grouped to share what they have read. Next, students were given time for another silent reading. For their homework for the next class, they were instructed to finish their journal, one journal for the graded reader and the other for the TOEFL article.
4. Week 2 (4th meeting): Submission of the reading journal. Students were instructed to save their reading journal into the Reading I folder on Dropbox created for them. Then, this was followed by group work, where students had to talk about the two readings using their reading journal as a guide. Next, they were instructed to borrow another graded reader and to choose another TOEFL reading article for the next week's activity.

These were the weekly processes that students had to observe for one semester. There were variations on group work so that the class would not become predictable, which would result in boredom on the part of the students. Basically, the weekly core task of the Reading I course was the accomplishment of the reading journal. A six-item questionnaire was designed to elicit responses from the students about their opinions on the use of the reading journal in their Reading I class. The students were free to respond either in English or Japanese. They were given at least 30 minutes to respond to all questions:

Q1. Did the Reading Journal encourage you to read more? If YES, how? If NO, why not?

Q2. Did the Reading Journal enable or help you to understand the main ideas of what you have read? If YES, how? If NO, why not?

Q3. Did the Reading Journal enable or help you to understand the details of what you have read? If YES, how? If NO, why not?

Q4. Did the Reading Journal enable or help you to think critically or think a lot about what you have read? If YES, how? If NO, why not?

Q5. Do you think the Reading Journal will help you prepare for the TOEFL test? If YES, how? If NO, why not?

Q6. Do you think you have done your best to accomplish or finish the reading journal? If NO, why not?

Results

Table 1. Reading journal's ability to encourage students to read more

Students' Response	Yes	No
I couldn't continue to read		1
It increased my reading speed	1	
It was useful if there was trouble understanding	1	
It provided me motivation to read more	7	
I got used to reading	1	
I understood how to answer the questions	2	
It helped me to learn vocabulary	1	
I could concentrate	1	
It didn't help me to read		1

Note. n (total number of respondents) = 16

The data in Table 1 show that 14 out of 16 students believed that the reading journal encouraged them to read. Specifically, seven students said that the reading journal provided them the motivation to read more. Two students thought it enabled them to understand the specific questions being asked from them to answer. Other reasons why reading journal was found to have the ability to encourage students to read are: 1) It increased reading speed (1 student); 2) It aided understanding (1 student); 3) It enabled student to get used to reading (1 student); 4) it aided vocabulary learning (1 student); and 5) it enabled students to concentrate (1 student). Only two students did not find the reading journal useful as far as encouraging them to read more.

Table 2. Reading journal’s ability to enable students to understand the reading’s main ideas

Students’ Response	Yes	No
No explanation		2
No explanation	4	
I had to write a summary	10	

Note. n (total number of respondents) = 16

It is evident in Table 2 that writing a summary enabled 10 students to understand the reading’s main ideas. Four students said that the reading journal enabled them to understand the reading’s main ideas, too, but provided no reason as to how it helped them. Two students did not think the reading journal helped them to understand the reading’s main ideas.

Table 3. Reading journal’s ability to enable students to understand the reading’s important details

Students’ Response	Yes	No
No explanation		2
No explanation	3	
The summary helped me	6	
I learned from classmates during group work	2	
The guide questions in the journal helped me	3	

Note. n (total number of respondents) = 16

The students provided three reasons as to how the reading journal enabled them to understand the important details from the readings. These are writing the summary (6 students), the reading journal’s guide questions (3 students), and learning from group work (2 students). Three students responded that the reading journal enabled them to understand the important details of the readings, but did not specify any reason. Two students, however, did not find the reading journal useful as far as helping them to understand the reading’s important details. They, too, did not provide an explanation.

Table 4. Reading journal’s ability to enable students to think critically

Students’ Response	Yes	No
No explanation		2
No explanation	1	
I had to think because I had to write the summary	7	
I needed to write critical or inferential questions	2	
I had to write my opinion	4	

Note. n (total number of respondents) = 16

As seen in Table 4, students gave three reasons how the reading journal enabled them to think critically. These include summary writing (7 students), opinion writing (4 students), and writing critical or inferential questions (2 students). One student indicated that he or she was able to think critically, but no explanation was provided. Also, one student said that the reading journal did not help him or her to think critically, and there was no reason indicated.

Table 5. Reading journal's ability to prepare students for TOEFL test

Students' Response	Yes	No
No explanation		2
No explanation	1	
I learned to read more	5	
I learned more vocabulary	2	
I have confidence to read challenging books	2	
I have motivation to read	4	

Note. n (total number of respondents) = 16

Table 5 shows four reasons how the reading journal could help students prepare for the TOEFL test. Five students said that because of the reading journal, they had to read more. Four students indicated that the reading journal motivated them to read. Two students said that they learned more vocabulary, while the other two indicated that they became confident to read challenging books. One student indicated that the reading journal prepared him or her for the TOEFL test, but did not write the reason. On the other hand, two students believed that the reading journal did not prepare them for the TOEFL test.

Table 6. Students' response if they have done their best to accomplish the reading journal

Students' Response	Yes	No
I have part-time job		1
I have busy schedule		1
I have to do many homework		2
No response	12	

Note. n (total number of respondents) = 16

As shown in Table 6, 12 out of 16 students indicated that they have done their best to accomplish the journal, while four said they did not. The reasons of the students who said they have not their best include too many homework (2 students), part-time job (1 student), and busy schedule (1 student).

Discussion

Based on the oral feedback, my intermediate proficient students found it difficult to read non-fiction books and articles in English such as the ones in TOEFL. However, almost half of the total number of them indicated that they were motivated to read because of the reading journal. Students also wrote that the reading journal enabled them to learn new vocabulary, increased their reading speed, enabled them to concentrate, and aided them when they had trouble understanding the content. All these are believed to have contributed to students' motivation to read more. The reading journal did not contain any part where students could write new vocabulary from their reading. However, a student indicated that he or she could learn new vocabulary from using the reading journal. The reading journal became a means that encouraged students to read regularly, one book and one article of their choice every week that gave them more opportunities to encounter more new vocabulary. Some researchers say an individual needs to come across a word 17 times to learn it. Nation (1997) states that to remember a word, a learner has to keep meeting the word by doing reading in large amounts, which was made possible by the reading journal.

Learning how to effectively use the reading journal is like learning how to effectively acquire and use a skill. The process of learning a skill by means of a course of instruction has been defined as a three-stage process: verbalization, automatization and autonomy (Ur, 2002). Verbalization, also known as presentation, requires teachers to mediate new materials or skills to be learned so they appear in an accessible form and thus can easily be perceived and understood. In this study, the reading journal as the learning strategy was presented. Ur further explains that in order for effective verbalization to take place, the following six guidelines for giving explanations and instructions should be taken account:

1. Explicit explanations and instructions must be given,
2. Ensure full attention,
3. Present explanations and instructions more than once,
4. Be brief but clear,
5. Illustrate with examples relating these as far as possible to the learners' own lives and experiences,
6. Get feedback from the learners.

These six guidelines were observed when presenting the reading journal.

After verbalization, learners need to practice repetitively, usually in meaningful exercises or activities until they achieve mastery. This is referred to as automatization. This is exactly what was done with the reading journal. It was made sure that the students had a good preliminary grasp of how to use the reading journal through engaging themselves in more practice until they achieved mastery of how to accomplish the reading journal. Once materials or skills are automatized, learners begin to improve on their own through further meaningful practice activities. Learners begin to speed up performance, to perceive or create new combinations, and to 'do their own thing'. At this stage learners are autonomous. They have little need of a teacher except perhaps as a supportive or challenging colleague and are ready, or nearly ready, to perform as masters of the skills, or as teachers themselves. It is believed that almost all students became autonomous in using the reading journal. The successful implementation of the three-stage of skill or strategy learning is thought to have contributed to the other positive responses of the students, that is, the reading journal enabled to increase their reading speed, enabled them to concentrate, and aided them when they had trouble understanding the content. Again, these resulted in students' motivation to read more.

Bandura (1986) explains that motivation (or a lack thereof) is the result of an individual's self-efficacy related to a task. He defines self-efficacy as the beliefs we have about ourselves that cause us to make choices, put forth effort, and persist in the face of difficulty. It is believed that the reading journal provided students with a learning strategy that developed their self-efficacy to be motivated to read as revealed in their response. This finding finds support in the results from the survey studies, which suggested that the use of strategies is significantly related to self-efficacy beliefs. Specifically, the results of the study of Magogwe and Oliver (2007) using 480 Botswana students who were learning English as a second language showed that there was a significant relationship between Botswana ESL learners' strategy use and their self-efficacy beliefs. In another context, Su and Duo's (2012) study of 200 Taiwanese students revealed that learning strategies were significantly associated with self-efficacy beliefs. The same is true with the study of Wong (2005) who interviewed 6 Malaysian participants to explore their language learning strategies and self-efficacy beliefs. The results showed that high-self-efficacy learners used more language learning strategies. As far as reading is concerned, Wang and Li (2010) discovered that reading self-efficacy was positively correlated to reading strategies, namely, metacognitive, social/affective and cognitive strategies. Readers who had high efficacy used more reading strategies than reader who had low self-efficacy.

As far as understanding the main idea is concerned, writing the summary in the reading journal helped the students. Summary writing gave students an overview of the text's whole meaning. It required students to pay careful attention to the meaning and shape of the entire text. Writing summary did not only help students understand the main idea of a reading material, but also its important details. This is because students had to select the important details and summarize them. Working in groups also enabled students to understand important details of their reading materials. During the group work, each student had to talk about what they read using their reading journal as a guide. All members of the group had to pay attention and were encouraged to ask questions. It is possible that the sharing and question and answer part of the group activity reinforced students' understanding of the important details of the reading materials.

The results also revealed that the reading journal enabled students to think critically. One source of critical thinking, which is taking control of our conscious thought processes, is the summary writing. It is possible that when students wrote the summary of their readings, they had to analyze, synthesize and evaluate what they read, which are essential steps in critical thinking process. Another source of critical thinking is finding an intriguing sentence or passage then interpreting the idea or situation by writing extended comments. As Facione (1990) explains, when we think critically, we make purposeful, self-regulatory judgment, which results in interpretation. Students had to interpret what they read in order to write extended comments about intriguing sentences and passages. They had to formulate inferential or critical questions and had to write the possible answers to those questions. They had to express opinions, specifically what they liked and did not like about the readings and had provide explanations for such response.

The end-goal of utilizing the reading journal was to prepare students for the TOEFL test. Except for two students, all students thought that the reading journal could help them prepare to get better scores in the said test because it motivated them read more, enabled them to learn more vocabulary, aided them to understand the main ideas as well as important details of the reading materials, were among the reasons.

Finally, based on the results, it can be assumed that the two students, who did not find the reading journal useful for preparing them for the TOEFL test, did not have time to accomplish the reading journal. This lack of time, which may be due to busy schedule or part-time job, affected their motivation to accomplish the reading journal. This in turn resulted in their negative perceptions of the benefits of the reading journal as far as developing reading abilities is concerned.

Conclusion and Implications

In order for extensive reading to be successful, there are many factors to be considered. This study looked at the benefits of reading journal in extensive reading. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the reading journal motivated students to read more, enabled them to understand the main idea and important details of the reading materials of their choice, and enabled them to think critically. Students' responses revealed that they were motivated to read more because the reading journal enabled them to learn new vocabulary, increased their reading speed, enabled them to concentrate, and aided them when they had trouble understanding the readings' content. The guide questions in the reading journal were believed to be a contributing factor in achieving these benefits.

Careful implementation of the reading journal played an important role as far as achieving these benefits are concerned. It involved observing the three-stage of skill or strategy learning, namely: presentation, automatization and autonomy. It is believed that the reading journal served as the learning strategy for students that developed their self-efficacy to be motivated to read more.

The reading journal for this study was intended for use in the English reading course. However, any course that requires students to read could utilize the reading journal. The reading journal contents or guide questions can be modified to fit the needs of the students.

Limitations of the Study

Asking respondents questions such as "Did the Reading Journal encourage you to read? If YES, how? If NO, why not?" enabled students to reflect on their responses. However, more in-depth responses could be elicited if there was an interview conducted to follow up each response. For example, when the student wrote that the reading journal motivated him or her to read more because he or she could learn more vocabulary, this response could be clarified by asking which part of the reading journal enabled him or her to learn more vocabulary. Furthermore, the interview could encourage those who did not provide explanations for their responses to clarify their answers.

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