STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ABOUT AN ONLINE EXTENSIVE READING COURSE WITH THE HELP OF EDMODO

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SUMMARY

Extensive reading has been widely known to be beneficial to language learning of students at all levels. However, it is not always carried out successfully for some reasons such as materials shortage or lack of checking schemes. This paper describes an online-extensive reading course with the help of Edmodo which was set up to help second year students improve their reading skills at School of Foreign Languages - Thai Nguyen University (SFL - TNU). The paper is devided into two main sections. First, the paper reveals how an online extensive reading course was set up and operated and how the teacher could check students' readings using Edmodo. Second, the paper presents the data of books from the library that arouse students' interests and their attitudes toward the course. The research results suggest what materials may meet students concerns, what they think about the course and can serve as a model for small projects that could be done in reading classes in the settings of regional universities.

Key words: *online extensive reading; set up; course; Edmodo; attitudes*

INTRODUCTION

For many people, reading is not only a source of learning but also a source of enjoyment. A good reading competence is a necessity for those who desire to succeed in academic careers in paticular and in many other professions in general. Therefore, in many curricula, reading capacity is highly valued and required by all students. However, not all students are able to master this skill; they still struggle with making sense of texts or boosting their reading speed. Reasons for these situations are various, including wrong reading approaches, unsatisfactory reading schedules or lack of reading resources.

With reference to specific situation for teaching and learning English at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, the Vietnamese Educational Ministry requires English learning students to get C1 level at all four skills after 4 years at universities. Basing on students' current reading levels and the intensive reading curricula in which only two periods per week are devoted to teaching reading, it is highly demanding for students to

boost their reading competence without doing extra reading outside classrooms.

Recently, some extensive reading courses have been integrated into the intensive reading courses, but the results have not been satisfactory due to materials shortage, lack of accountability schemes or students' motivation. Therefore, this research was carried out to set up an extensive reading course which aims at solving all the problems mentioned above and helping increase students' reading levels.

Extensive reading

According to Stanley (2007)[6], Reading is a process of constructing meaning from written text. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of interrelated sources of information. Recently, researchers have identified significant influence of reading on academic achivement. Reading can help students extend vocabulary, syntax and other language expertise that will empower their use of the larget language. In order to get maximum benefits from reading, readers need to be involved in both intensive and extensive reading activities. However, This paper focuses only on extensive reading.

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It is believed that Harold Palmer was the first person to use the term of extensive reading in foreign language teaching. In his view, extensive reading means that students read a great deal and read quickly. He also stated that books were read for both language study and real-world experiences. According to Jacobs & Gallo (2002) [4], in extensive reading, students read silently a large number of materials which are usually at a level that permits them to obtain at least a fair understanding of what they are reading without outside help.

In summary, extensive reading involves learners' reading large quantities of texts for enjoyment and developing general reading skills.

Characteristics of a Successful Extensive Reading (ER) Program

Day and Bamford (1998) [2] claimed that a successful ER program should have 10 principles. They stated :

These are what we believe are the basic ingredients of extensive reading. We encourage teachers to use them as a way to examine their belief about reading in general and extensive reading in paticular, and the ways they teach foreign language reading. We posit these ten principles in the hopes that others will consider them and react to them.

Their top 10 principles were:

1. The reading material is easy.

2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available.

3. Learners choose what they want to read.

4. Learners read as much as possible.

5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.

6. Reading is its own reward.

7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.

8. Reading is individual and silent.

9. Teachers orient and guide their students.

10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

[3; pp. 137-141]

In reality, not all 10 ER principles have been always practiced in ER programs around the world. In each ER course, teachers just adopt some specific principles which are suitable for their ER contexts. For example, students were required to write a report on each book they have read. In this case, principle 6 "Reading is its own reward" was not used. According to Kweon and Kim (2008) [1], they did not mention 10 principles. In their ER programs, students had to read each text carefully to understand the meaning of the story because they were required to take a detailed comprehension quizz at the beginning of the following class.

These issues raise a question about what extensive reading really means. In fact, there is no obvious answer and also no single approach to the practice of extensive reading.

Setting up an extensive reading program

According to Richard (2013) [5], an extensive reading program requires a great deal of planning and should be taken in at least 6 months. The following decisions should be made before the program:

What should the students read?

Reading materials should be easy enough for students to read to get an overall understanding. Such materials may range from comic books, online texts to short stories. In addition, materials such as graded readers which are written for foreign language learners are a useful source of extensive reading. These include simply books, fiction and nonfiction in which the content is controlled to match students' language competence.

How much reading should students do?

There are two ways to assign students' reading tasks. Firstly, students is demanded to read something weekly and are awarded credit to their final grades depending on how much they can read. Secondly, students can

set their own goals in their reading with the help of the teacher who could give them advise on how to set a reasonable target number of books per week or month and encourage tem to meet the goals.

Where should reading be done – in class, out of class, or both?

Generally, most of the extensive reading is done out of class when students are able to spend a significant amount of time on it. However, some teachers occasionally ask their students to read in class to show them the importance of reading.

How should students' reading be graded?

There are some possible ways to assess students' extensive reading. The most common approach is to use reading targets and if students meet the targets, they are awarded to the final grades. In addition, an internet program called Mreader, including comprehensive questions on a large number of books, is freely used by schools to check the students' reading ability..

How should the program be introduced and advertised to the students?

According to Day & Bamford (2002)[3], students should be introduced about extensive reading and provided essential guidance as they read. Moreover, they should also be stressed on the benefits of extensive reading:

- help students read faster and understand more;

- help them to read in meaningful phrases, rather than word by word;

- increases their confidence in their reading ability;

- increase their reading knowledge;

- consolidate their grammatical knowledge; and

- helps improve their writing proficiency and oral fluency.

Another factor that teachers should consisder is to encourage them to read what they like.

As they have to read a large number of books, it is vital for them to enjoy their readings. They should be also guided that it is not necessary to read for 100% of understanding . If they meet new words, they should ignore them, keep reading and try to guess the meaning of those words.

METHODOLODY

Brief description of the current reading curriculum

As mentioned in the introduction, English learning students at School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, Vietnam has 2 periods of reading per week. In the curriculum, it is expected that after 4 years at university, students, almost at A2 level of English, are able to get at least B2 to graduate. In theory, it is impossible for them to meet this goal if they do not spend sufficient time practicing their language skills in general, reading in paticular outside the class. One of the current solutions to the problem is to assign more reading tasks for students to do at home. However, students often feel stressed and tired of such readings. As a result, many of them manage not to read and get unsatisfactory results at their final exams.

Brief description of the on-line extensive reading site: er-central.com

This is an online extensive reading site with large quantities of interesting books, including a wide range of genres. All the books are graded according to levels and it is possible for the teacher to view reading progress of all students in the class. On the site, students are able to read, listen and do comprehension and vocabulary quizzes. In addition, there is no cost for using it; therefore, every student can assess the site for free provided they have access to internet.

Brief description of edmodo software

Edmodo is a free educational website which students and teachers can reach out to one another and connect by sharing ideas,

problems, and helpful tips. A teacher can assign and grade work on the site. Students can also get help from the entire class on Edmodo. It is a safe studying environment because the teacher can see everything which is posted on Edmodo. Parents can join the class to view their children's studying.

Course procedure

35 second-year students, who are identified as average proficient learners, were involved in the study. These average learners got the reading score ranging from 5- 6.5 in the previous term. The following is the schedule of the extensive reading course which was carried out in 15 weeks based on the reading curriculum of the school.

Week 1: The teacher registered a personal account and an institution account on the online extensive reading site. Then she assessed the site by the institution account and loaded students' accounts he/she wanted to manage there. In class, the teacher announced students' accounts and asked them to read two stories on the site weekly. After reading, they were asked to write a short writing about the stories they have just read (story reflection) and send them to the teacher through edmodo software.

Week 2-13: Students began reading stories. Weekly, the teacher viewed students' progress in their reading on the site and their writing on Edmodo and reminded those who did not complete the assigment.

Week 14: The teacher asked students to send their reading records to her email to check the whole reading progress of them and she also checked all students' writing on Edmodo one more time.

Week 15: The teacher announced students' reading and writing progress, gave mark rewards to them and asked them to do a survey questionaire about their attitudes toward the course in 15 minutes. The following are the questions:

Q1: Did you like reading stories on "er-central.com" website?

a   Yes

b.   No

Q2: Which of the following skills do you most likely improve after the course?

a.   Reading speed and understanding

b.   Writing skills

c.   Grammar

d.   vocabulary

e.   Interest in reading

f.   Others:

....

....

Q3: What difficulties did you meet when reading the books?

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Q4: What recommendations do you want to make to improve the next course?

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Q5: Would you prefer to undergo another extensive reading course in the next term?

a.   Yes

b.   No

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Question 1: Students' interest in the extensive reading course

Students' responses	Yes	No
	35	0

It is clearly seen that 100% of the participants enjoyed their reading on the site. It can be inferred that the books are diversified in contents and genres and could engage students in reading.

Question 2: Which of the following skills do you most likely improve after the course?

As seen in the table below, most of the students gave positive comments on their

progress. 100% of the participants stated that they could improve their vocabulary knowledge after the course. In addition, 30 out of 35 students thought they could upgrade their reading speed and understanding and grammar by weekly reading. Over 80% of them also believed that by improving their vocabulary and grammar and writing story relection every week, they were able to improve their writing skills. Finally, over 65% supposed that they became more interested in reading, which means a lot in establishing a habit of reading everyday for learners.

Questions	Students' responses
1. Reading speed and understanding	30
2. Writing skills	29
3. Grammar	30
4. Vocabulary	35
5. Interest in reading	20
6. Others	0

Question 3: Students' difficulties when reading

With reference to this question, only 20 students had the answers. Most of them (18/20) stated that they lacked vocabulary when reading the stories, which prevented them from understanding the text. This issue should be noticed by the researcher who is well advised to reconsisder the level of books students are reading. The remaining two students had difficulties in reading online. They prefered reading hard versions of the book because this made them feel more comfortable, which is easily understood because some people are not of the habit of reading online.

Question 4: Students' recommendations to improve the next extensive reading course

Regarding this question, merely 5 students gave their suggestions. All of them supposed that there should be more sources of reading so that they had more choices. 3 of them even stated that they would like to read more than two stories a week. In addition, two in five answerers recommended the researcher to provide hard copies of the book. In brief, although there were just a few responses to this question, the suggestions are valuable for the researcher to make necessary changes in the next course.

Question 5: Students' desire to do the next extensive reading course

Students' responses	Yes	No
	35	0

As can be seen from the table, although having some difficulties in reading, all students desired to continue the course in the next term. It can be inferred that all students were aware of the benefits of their reading and could feel their improvement after the extensive reading course.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In order for extensive reading to be successful, there are many factors to be considered. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that although reading levels were not actually suitable for students' reading competence, such kinds of graded books motivated students to read and enabled them to improve many aspects of language including reading and writing skills, grammar and vocabulary. Another success of the course is being able to arouse students' interest in reading, which is a vital factor to make them read regularly without feeling stressed.

Careful implementation of the extensive reading course also played an important role in achieving the benefits mentioned above, especially checking students' readings and writings on Edmodo. It required the teacher to spend a considerable amount of time on doing these jobs. If not done carefully, it was easy to demotivate students or students are able to cheat in the course.

From the information above, it is recommended that such extensive reading course should be continued in larger scale with some modification to engage all students in the course.

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TÓM TẮT

NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN ĐỐI VỚI KHÓA ĐỌC MỞ RỘNG TRỰC TUYẾN VỚI SỰ TRỢ GIÚP CỦA MẠNG XÃ HỘI EDMODO

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Đọc mở rộng được cho là rất hữu ích đối với sinh viên ngôn ngữ ở mọi trình độ. Tuy nhiên không phải lúc nào nó cũng được thực hiện thành công do một số nguyên nhân như việc thiếu tài liệu đọc hay thiếu các hình thức kiểm tra đánh giá. Bài báo này miêu tả một khóa đọc mở rộng trực tuyến với sự trợ giúp của mạng xã hội Edmodo. Khóa học được tiến hành với mục tiêu cải thiện kỹ năng đọc hiểu của sinh viên năm thứ hai, Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Thái Nguyên. Bài báo được chia thành hai phần chính. Phần thứ nhất miêu tả chi tiết cách thức tạo lập một khóa đọc trực tuyến và các phương thức giáo viên có thể áp dụng để kiểm tra tiến trình đọc hiểu của sinh viên. Phần thứ hai giới thiệu các dữ liệu sách trực tuyến và phân tích thái độ của sinh viên đối với toàn bộ khóa học. Kết quả của bài báo là một ví dụ điển hình về một khóa đọc mở rộng trực tuyến nhằm cải thiện kỹ năng đọc hiểu của sinh viên ngôn ngữ.

Từ khóa: Đọc mở rộng, thiết lập, khóa học, mạng xã hội Edmodo, thái độ

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