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Motivating repeated readers in an Extensive Reading class: A critical reflection on course design

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Abstract

Studies illustrating the effectiveness of ER in facilitating learners' development in reading fluency, speed and vocabulary have been reported in different contexts. However, studies exploring the extent to which ER accommodates repeated readers are almost absent from the literature. It is in this light that this paper proposes a number of motivating tasks that teachers may use to teach ER as a course. The present paper illustrates the task-based syllabus I developed for repeated readers. I will describe the series of motivating tasks and explain the rationale behind each.

Keywords: Extensive Reading (ER), reading fluency, task-based syllabus, course design evaluation, teaching reflection

Introduction

In English language teaching, Extensive reading (hereafter, ER) can take different forms (Day and Bamford, 1998): (1) as a separate, stand-alone course; (2) as a program in a school curriculum; (3) a part of an existing course; and (4) as an extracurricular activity. While numerous studies have focused on ER as a program, a part of an existing course, and an extracurricular activity, a very few studies have yet focused on the implementation of ER as a stand-alone course. There even fewer studies focusing on an ER course where the students are repeated or low-achieving learners (with the exception of Lituanas, Jacobs, and Renandya, 1999). Therefore, when I was assigned to teach a stand-alone ER course for repeated course in the department, I could not find any literature featuring an ER course that is particularly designed for repeated learners. Thus, an ideal way to carry out my teaching was to set and design my own ER course.

In this paper, the ER course is situated in a teacher preparation program in a Faculty of Language and Literature in a private university in Indonesia. The ER course is offered to first-year students. It lasts for three hours and offered during a regular and an intensive semester. In a regular semester, the course is offered once a week for 14 weeks whereas, in an

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intensive semester, the course is offered twice a week for seven weeks (i.e. a total of 42 hours).

For the present paper, the ER course was offered in an intensive semester, which ran from May 2014 to June 2014. The 16 learners who took part in the present study consisted of seven women and nine men, with ages ranging from 18 to 22. All students who took part in the course were repeated learners. The term 'repeated learners' here means they have taken the ER class but failed to meet some course requirement and thus, could not pass the course. Repeated learners here were not the same as 'beginning English learners' because they have completed other courses in the department and thus, their English competence was higher than beginning learners.

Teaching repeated learners in an Extensive Reading class in an intensive semester poses a number of problems. A major concern shared by teachers in teaching repeated learners is students' low motivation. Indeed, Lituanas, Jacobs, and Renandya (1999) believe that implementing a successful ER program might be especially challenging for low-achieving students because such students lack the desire to read extensively. Hence, when teaching ER with repeated learners, teachers must provide more enticing and motivating classroom-based tasks to spur students' interest in reading books. This is the main reason I decided to redesign the existing ER course to accommodate the challenges of teaching repeated learners. Underlying the design is the belief that cultivating students' motivation largely depends on the creativity of the teachers (Dörnyei, 2001) and the very core of ER, that is, developing reading fluency was better in a classroom atmosphere where the students are motivated and enjoy the learning process in the classroom.

The present paper seeks to share a course design of an Extensive Reading class for repeated learners offered during an intensive semester in a teacher preparation department in a university in Indonesia. The goal of the current paper is to critically reflect on the course design as seen from students' end-of-the-semester reflection, end-of-the-semester questionnaire and a final project. It begins with discussing underlying reasons for selecting task-based language teaching (TBLT) to structure the ER course. It then goes on to describe the five tasks utilized in the class, focusing on its characteristics and the theory behind it. Evidence for its benefits from students' perspectives will be discussed in the 'Reflection' section. Finally, some suggestions will be made to help students get the most out of an ER class. Also, the present paper will offer insights and learning activities into the limited literature available on possible tasks for a stand-alone ER course.

Rationale for selecting a task-based approach to the ER course

In an effort to course design an ER course, I tried to apply the characteristics of the ER approach established by Day and Bamford (1998, pp. 7-8):

1. Students read as much as possible;
2. A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available;
3. Students select what they want to read;
4. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding;
5. Reading is its own reward;
6. Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of students;
7. Reading is individual and silent;
8. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower;
9. Teachers orient students to the goals of the program; and
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader for students.

While the ten principles are very popular and useful in a course where ER is part of an existing course, when ER is taught in a stand-alone course, they contribute relatively little to syllabus design, classroom activities, and material design. These ten principles do not give answers to practical questions such as: How should I structure the course?; What kinds of learning activities students should do in the classroom?; and What should the assessment be about?

By considering all these questions, I found task-based language teaching (TBLT) to be the most appropriate approach to guide the course design of a stand-alone ER course. First, both ER and TBLT focus on exchanging and understanding meanings. Although at present, there is no agreeable definition of a task, I found Nunan's definition of a task is the most appropriate for selecting activities in an ER classroom:

> "…a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989, p.10).

In an ER class, this can be applied when students are encouraged to exchange information on the books they have read outside the classroom. To this end, Green (2005) argues that when teaching ER, TBLT can enhance the goal of ER. In ER classroom, a task can be viewed as a structure to integrate, a normally solitary and out of class reading activity, into the pedagogically constructed fabric of the classroom.

Second, the TBLT framework provides not only a structure but also a guidance of the assessment in the ER class. In TBLT, Sheehan (2005) notes that the focus on discovering and negotiating meaning through completing tasks should be the primary goal rather than seeing tasks as a medium to practice pre-taught language skills. When this principle is applied in an ER class, then, the focus of the assessment is how learners are able to express the meaning rather than on the production of language skills.

Another reason for selecting TBLT in the present ER class is because of the different types of tasks available to choose from. According to Feez (1998), tasks in TBLT can be either: "those that learners might need to achieve in real life" and "those that have a pedagogical purpose specific to the classroom" (p.7). Ellis (2011) classifies tasks into three sets of opposing criteria: (1) focused or unfocused; (2) input-providing or output-prompting; and (3) closed or open. These different types of tasks will help ER teachers to choose the kind of activities that deem fit to the purpose of ER.

Despite the vast benefits of TBLT, not all ER proponents are thrilled with the use of tasks to teach ER. Some believe that students benefit from ER by simply reading (Mason, 2010). Others think that the use of follow-up activities will only serve as a distraction on students' reading development (van Deuson, 2010). The opposing views on the use of tasks represent different practices of ER although when ER is taught in a stand-alone course, the use of tasks is relatively common.

For the present paper, I designed five tasks for the ER classroom. They are Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), Reading Experience Sharing Time (REST), Creative Activities for Reading Engagement (CARE), Skill Enhancement Activities (SEA) and Drop Everything and Listen (DEAL). They were designed and implemented with an intermediate-level class of 16 first-year repeated learners at a teacher preparation program in an Indonesian university.

The tasks series in the ER class

In what follows, I briefly describe each task that structures each meeting in the ER class and then, connect each task with related theories. It needs to be noted that although each meeting always started with task 1: Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) and ended with task 5: Drop Everything and Listen (DEAL), the rest of the tasks (task 2, 3, and 4) were not necessarily practiced in every meeting.

1. Drop Everything and Read (DEAR)

Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) comes with many names: ‘Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading' (USSR), Free Voluntary Reading

(FVR), Daily Independent Reading Time (DIRT) (Siah and Kwok, 2010). All of these versions share common features: students read silently, the reading materials are selected by the students, and students read without interruption (Gardnier, 2001). Day and Bamford (1998) explain that DEAR is based on the premise of students develops reading fluency and accuracy by actually reading instead of answering a set of reading comprehension questions. Siah and Kwok (2010) explain that DEAR is often embedded in school program where the school will reserve a designation time, often 15-20 minutes, a day to allow students to read whatever they want. They are not required to finish their reading and do not have to complete follow-up activities afterward.

In the present study, I utilized DEAR time at the beginning of each class hour. During the first three meetings, the DEAR time lasted for 15 minutes and it gradually increased to 20 minutes. At the end of the class, the DEAR time lasted for 30 minutes. Because the DEAR time was embedded in a course, students were required to read graded readers and not any reading materials. My decision to start the class with DEAR was to highlight the paramount importance of developing reading proficiency through actual reading. Seow (1999, p.1) adds the following purposes of DEAR: (1) to improve students' concentration span; (2) to provide students with a positive reading experience; (3) to help students form good reading habits for reading; and (4) to increase students' desire to read on their own during their free time. Since teacher provides a good role model for reading, I also used READ time to read together with the students.

2. Reading Experience Sharing Time (REST)

Since sharing can be an integral part of reading, it seems only natural that students should have the opportunities to share their reading experiences with their classmates. Therefore, I created Reading Experience Sharing Time or REST, for short. Here, students worked in a group and share their reading experience in the past week. The activity is inspired by Harmer (2007) who maintains the need to keep track of what students read as a way to make sure students do read outside the classroom. To make the REST time interesting, I utilize various sharing activities such as 3/2/1 approach (Students shares what they have read in 3, 2 or 1 minutes) guided sharing (Students shares their reading experiences based on a set of teacher-created questions), and focus sharing.

Another motivational strategy that I used is providing awards for Best Readers of the Week. Low-achievement students might need to be treated with care because they may have low (academic) self-images (Goodlad, 1983), some might even consider themselves as failures. By providing awards, I attempted to give an opportunity for success and

hopefully, they can give a more positive self-image. Setting up an award for best readers also projected a public acknowledgment of their achievement and in the process showcasing what they have achieved.

To avoid the danger of monotonous, I designed three procedures to select the best reader of the week:

a. Students shared in a group of why they needed to be nominated as the best reader of the week. Later each group nominated one member and shared reasons for such a nomination.
b. Each student wrote a letter to their friends persuading classmates to choose them as the best reader of the book.
c. Each student recorded a persuasive speech arguing why they needed to be selected as the best reader of the week.

These three procedures naturally lead to the use of persuasive, enthusiastic language, and a combination of language skills as they strive towards promoting themselves to be best readers. Allowing various kinds of sharing, also facilitates three types of competence (Widodo, 2008, p.74): participative competence (the ability to respond appropriately to tasks), interactional competence (the ability to interact appropriately with peers when sharing reading experiences) and academic competence (the ability to acquire skills necessary for academic success).

Giving incentives for best readers is debatable (Powell, 2005) because students may have read to get the incentive and not for the pleasure of reading itself. When selecting an award for best reader scheme, my intention was not to turn reading into a competition but simply to provide acknowledgment for effort. Therefore, I did not set any criteria for best readers but gave students the freedom to set up the criteria and nominated deserving students. In my view, much of the value of the best reader policy is placed on the interaction between learners and how they came to a shared understanding in the process of nominating a group member to be the best reader. Students chosen to be the best reader of the week were given a certificate (See Appendix 1), featured in the class facebook, and were given one additional point for the total grade.

3. Creative Activity for Reading Engagement (CARE)

CARE is a task where students need to complete individually or in groups as a follow-up activity to illustrate students' reading progress and/or gain. Examples of the tasks in CARE are making a bookmark of favorite quotation, oral digitally report a book summary, making a group reflection through pixton comics. A common feature of tasks under CARE is the utilization of technology, in this context: facebook, soundcloud, and pixton comics.

According to Dörnyei (2001), one strategy to make a task motivating is by setting up tasks that involve the public display of students' skill. I found facebook (fb) as an appropriate media simply because all the students have an fb account and has been using it actively although mainly for social purposes. Therefore, at the beginning of the class, I set up a class fb page where students needed to join. The class fb functions as a public display of students' works.

Another important aspect of CARE is the peer feedback session. Prior to submitting the final tasks, I gave time for students to comment on each other works through the class fb (see Appendix 2). Storch (2002) refers this as 'collective scaffolding' (p.121). He stated that such an activity is not only "cognitively" (p. 121) essential but also, contribute substantially to second language development By asking learners to comment on the stronger and weaker aspects of other students' oral production, following Coulson (2005), my pedagogical aim is to accelerate learners' mutual assistance in completing tasks and helps learners became more conscious of their language production.

A major criticism of a communication task is it helps students get meanings across but does not necessarily encourage learners to focus on form (Skehan, 1996). For example, when I asked students to orally report the book they have just read during REST, many students stumbled with the language problems. In another occasion, when they were describing their favorite quotations to the class, I found several students did not string the sentences using appropriate transitions. Thus, their description sounded bland and incoherence. For that reason, I designed a SEA task as the following section will briefly discuss.

4. Skill Enhancement Activities (SEA)

In previous ER classes, I quite often detected problems with certain features when students were completed ER tasks. I learned, then, that students might have been able to grasp the structure as a form, but nevertheless failed to understand the situations in which it could be used. Green (2005) criticizes common ER schemes as paying more attention to progressing students to one reading level to the next that it fails "to pay sufficient attention to the development of learners' target language systems" (p.309). To address this, I chose to reinforce CARE tasks with language task, which I call Skill Enhancement Activities or SEA. Although ER teachers are often advised not to pay attention to students' language skills, I found drawing students' attention to their language production was necessary considering some language problems may hinder meaning.

The SEA section was inspired by Long and Robinson (1998). According to them, in task-based learning, language structure is dealt with

not by teaching it as discrete items but by drawing students' attention to linguistic attention as they arise in a meaningful classroom context. In the ER class, I realized this by making students aware of the language structure students will likely encounter to complete CARE activities. For example, when asked to oral report a favorite book, I taught them how to summarize a book, especially the language structure to use.

5. Drop Everything and Listen (DEAL)

To complement DEAR time, I created an extensive listening activity called Drop Everything and Listen or DEAL for short conducted at the end of the class. In that time, students listened to three/four chapters of Tom Sawyer (from http://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/adventures-tom-sawyer). To ease their listening, I gave the text of the chapters so students could follow along and keep track of the spelling. When teachers utilize a similar DEAL activity, they might like to explore other listening texts with various lengths: poem, short stories, news stories, and etc. In addition to Tom Sawyer, students also listened to texts while doing gap-filling exercises during SEA time taken from http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/. Both of these sites provide rich resources for listening activities with native speaker voices.

Hobbs (2005) makes a point that teachers do not have to use native speakers for recording tasks. According to him, fluent non-native speakers may be more appropriate for several reasons. First, they are closer to the learners' world; second, in many contexts, they are more accessible. And finally, they may illustrate language that is more typical of fluent international English. Although I was aware that exposing students to fluent non-native speaker English might be more beneficial for my students, I found such recordings were not readily available online. Therefore, I used the readily teaching resources available online. This, of course, points to the need of providing teaching resources with fluent non-native speaker models if English as International Language (EIL) pedagogy is to be realized to the fullest.

Reflection

It is expected that students exposed to a new methodology have mixed reactions. Most students were satisfied with the task design, some even admitted that the task series help them to overcome their initial dissatisfaction experienced in the previous ER class. A few, however, have some resentment in completing CARE activities due to occasional problems with Internet connection.

One important lesson drawn from the present study is when implementing innovation in the classroom, the teacher needs to give

sufficient time for the students to be accustomed to the innovation (also in Johnston, 2005). One new task that I created is DEAL time. During the first few meetings, I noticed students felt uneasy and have trouble focusing on listening to Tom Sawyer. Some kept on checking their watches. Others would not stop whispering to their friends, passing notes to one another and checking their phones. Although I did not want my role to be like a police enforcing a rule of silence, I found myself on several occasions reminding students not to talk to their friends. Due to this role I have taken in these first few weeks, there were times when I felt doubtful of the approach and thought it was a waste of time but these occasional doubts did not stop me from consistently utilizing DEAL time at the end of every meeting. After the fifth meeting, students seemed to be accustomed to the activity. The course evaluation also shows that DEAL time was one of the activities that students found most helpful in facilitating language development.

It is worth noting that students' initial lack of engagement in the DEAL time was not found during DEAR time. This is very likely because students have been exposed to DEAR time from prior classes and thus, they already knew what was expected of them during DEAR time. Leung (2002) notes that it is difficult to establish a reading routine because language learners may find it challenging to find the discipline and commitment to reading extensively at the beginning. From teaching ER, I found that DEAR time was effective in establishing a reading routine and discipline as well as reading commitment.

I felt by structuring the ER course with task series of DEAR-REST-CARE-SEA-DEAL, the three-hour class time became more manageable for the teacher and more enjoyable for the students. It is important that teacher shares these task series at the first meeting so that students knew what was expected of them. In the present study, I began each meeting with a 20-25 minute DEAR time. On one occasion, a student, Ita (a pseudonym), texted me she would come late because of an unexpected traffic jam and anticipated she might miss the DEAR time. She said that she would do the DEAR time by herself on the bus. Although she was not expected to conduct the DEAR time on her own, I found her initiative show her degree of motivation and responsibility of a developing reader. She did not let her coming late to class disrupt her reading progress and attempt to continue the reading habit elsewhere.

The task series also provides the opportunity for task reinforcement. Take for example, during REST students can be asked to share what they have read during DEAR time. In this way, the DEAR time can serve as a pre-task for REST. In the present class, DEAL was always conducted at the end of the class. In future classes, it may be preferable to alternate the DEAR and DEAL times. The class can start with DEAL time and then, it

can serve as the content for CARE time, for example, by creating a skit of the chapter they have listened. The listening text in DEAL time can also be utilized for SEA time.

Another important task where changes were obvious is the best reader award scheme. The value students place on the best reader task could be seen from the considerable time they spent in setting up criteria for selecting best readers. In fact, through the process, students came up with many reasons in addition to a number of books; a common criterion for selecting best reader (Bamford and Day, 2002; Powell, 2005). Those reasons were jumping a reading level, reading beyond current reading level, and reading time. Students' preference of best reader tasks is evidence in student group reflection. At the end of the class, I asked students to reflect on their ER journey in the form of a comic (See Appendix 3).

The analysis of students' perceptions collected from the end-of-the-semester questionnaires highlight the theme of challenge and novelty as important in designing tasks for ER classrooms. In essence, the tasks during CARE time, SEA time, and DEAL time were designed specifically for this particularly students and thus, they were new. The pixton comic project during CARE time challenged students to work together and transform their reflection in a form of a comic for a wide, internet audience on Facebook. Previous studies on task-based language teaching suggest the importance of providing tasks related to the real world (Cropley and Cropley, 2009). Many students stated that creating tasks for this authentic and online audience was more meaningful than doing the same tasks for their instructors, as they would in a traditional assignment. A number of students admitted to deliberately shared their tasks with peers in their online social networks and in the process, gaining valuable feedback from them.

Despite students' enthusiasm in using digital technologies during CARE time, attention needs to be made in relation to the feasibility of these tasks for the local context. Although in the present context all students were equipped with internet connection, some students commented that the project has taken a disproportionate amount of time because of the slow internet connection. Yet, it is interesting to point out that, in general, students rose to meet this challenge in ways that transformed the challenge into ways to solve the problems. The student learned in time management; not working on the task last minutes.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of the present paper is to critically reflect on a series of tasks (DEAR, REST, CARE, SEA and DEAL) that I have designed for repeated learners in an ER class. Students found the task-relevant and

motivating. Although the tasks I have described may not fulfill the features of task-based lessons found in the literature, the task series does show how TBLT can be used to structure an ER course not only for repeated learners but also learners where ER is a stand-alone course. In the current context, the series of tasks have a significant effect on students reading development in particular reading attitudes and proficiency.

I hope that my learners who experienced the task series in the ER class will draw a sense of achievement and confidence from the process which will them to better enjoy reading in English in the future. For myself, I have found that designing tasks series for an ER class is a rewarding way of discovering how students approached reading, and to me, this has proved invaluable as a way to develop my skill in the course and material designs. Although my research took place in Indonesia, these task series would be applicable to other countries as well.

The Author

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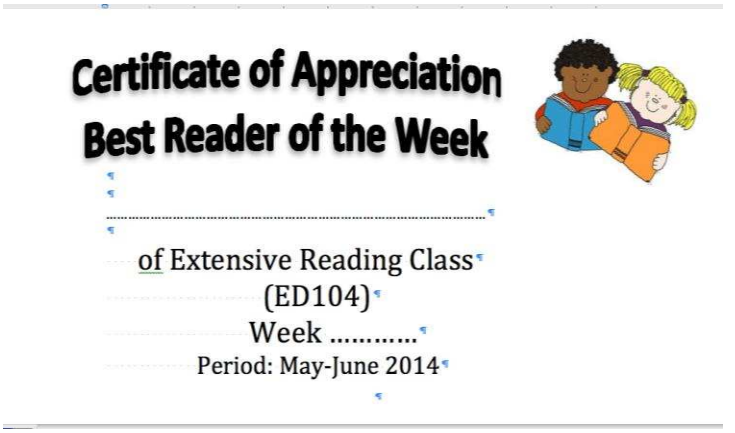
Appendix A
The certificate of best reader of the week



Appendix B
A snapshot of peer and teacher feedback on a student's oral report

Appendix C
Student reflection on ER Class