

Teaching Reading for Japanese EFL Undergraduate Students via Zoom

Gota Hayashi, Tokyo Keizai University, Japan

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Abstract

This paper documents how one teacher taught a reading course online using zoom during COVID-19 for nine second- and third- year EFL undergraduate students in Japan in three phases: (1) getting to know the students, (2) staying attuned to the students' wants and needs, and (3) getting students to become autonomous learners. Challenges as a result of COVID-19 and a move from classroom teaching to online teaching included difficulties in having students borrow and purchase books and having students conduct extensive reading throughout the course. Implications for teachers teaching reading in EFL contexts not limited to Japan are also provided.

Keywords: Reading, Online Instruction, Japanese University Students



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Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Japan unexpectedly needed to teach remotely due to the emergence of COVID-19, for the spring 2020 semester. The state of emergency was declared in seven of the 47 prefectures on April 7th, 2020, and the declaration extended to all prefectures on April 13th (Kodera, Rashed, & Hirata, 2020), necessitating university faculty members to teach remotely, with numerous tertiary institutions relying on zoom, an online platform that allow for video and audio conferencing (zoom, 2023). A course on Reading for undergraduate students learning EFL also had to be taught remotely with sessions reduced from 15 to 13 and without student-access to libraries during the beginning of the semester. The purpose of this paper is to document the lived experiences of how a university faculty member taught a course on Reading during the semester of COVID-19 to shed light on how teachers teaching EFL can effectively teach reading online in the future post COVID-19. Review of what is known about effective teaching of reading skills for EFL students will be presented, followed by how one teacher taught a course on Reading and its alignment with the existing literature. Finally, implications for faculty members teaching EFL at the undergraduate level will be discussed.

Literature on Effective Teaching of Reading Skills for EFL Students

Four key points are worth noting for teaching reading effectively based on a recent review of peer-reviewed journals. First, teaching reading strategies in the EFL context can lead to improvements in reading proficiency (Shih, Chern, & Reynolds, 2018). Second, learners can benefit from timed reading and repeated oral reading practice (Chang, 2012; Shimono, 2018). Third, extensive reading can improve students' motivation and self-confidence and foster positive images as EFL learners (Yilmaz, Atay, & Mustafa, 2020), with benefits including improvements in building reading fluency, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, and writing ability (Ng, Renandya, & Chong, 2019; Wang & Ho, 2019). Fourth, both extensive reading and intensive reading can improve EFL learners' levels of reading comprehension (Bahmani & Mohammad, 2017). It is also important to note that when a teacher is creative, a course focusing on one skill can involve multiple skills (Oxford, 2001).

Online Approach to Teaching a Course on Reading

The writer's approach to teaching reading did cover four key points identified in the literature: (1) the teaching of reading strategies, (2) timed reading and repeated oral reading practice, (3) extensive reading, and (4) intensive reading within the three phases of 13 online sessions. The phases described hereafter are as follows: first, getting to know the students; second, staying attuned to the students' needs and wants; and finally getting students to become autonomous readers. How the four key points identified in the literature intertwines with the three phases will be described hereafter.

Phase 1: Getting to Know the Students

The first phase which comprises of approximately four sessions involved getting to know the students, specifically in terms of their experiences with reading, introducing students to timed reading, extensive reading, and intensive reading. While reading courses since Spring 2016 when the writer started teaching the course often involved repeated reading of extensive reading material in the classroom setting (Nation, 2012), it was difficult to naturally have students practice repeated reading during the first phase, not only as a way for students to

develop their reading skills (Chang, 2012; Shimono, 2018) but also as a rapport building activity. Intensive reading that the author read recently were shared with the students: one on the mental health consequences of COVID-19 for people living in Japan (Shigemura, Ursano, Morganstein, Kurosawa, & Benedek, 2019), and the other related to a petition for delayed fall semester over an online semester for a university abroad (Fu & Kim, 2020). These articles were provided as a way for students to get to know what the teacher is reading and what the students will be able to read in their future without using their dictionary if they continued with reading. Furthermore, research on EFL learners' foreign language reading motivation and reading comprehension over a three-month period indicates that not only did the $i + 1$ group perform significantly better on the post-test on reading comprehension but also managed to increase their motivation towards reading (Niazifar & Shakibaei, 2019).

However, after hearing that many of the students had not experienced reading many books in L1 or L2 and after understanding their levels of reading comprehension for those two articles (Fu & Kim, 2020; Shigemura et al., 2019), the decision was made to allow students to select what they read instead of choosing difficult texts for them. Namaziandost, Nasri, and Ziafar (2019) recommended that teachers consider the value of self-selected materials as a key to successful implementation of extensive reading. Jennifer and Ponniah (2019) found that students who experienced high anxiety experienced negative emotions including confusion, boredom, and stress, preventing them from accessing appropriate information and linguistic constructs from memory. Six out of nine students who participated in the course on reading have taken another course with the author before, and the author perceived it important to: have students continue to experience positive emotions that will provide continual exposure in English, show them what they will be capable of if they continue on with their studies, and promote an environment that allow them to experience the joy of reading self-selected materials and broaden their horizons while developing their linguistic competence in the target language as well.

Phase 2: Staying Attuned to the Students' Needs and Wants

The second phase includes two key points as a result of staying attuned to the students' needs and wants and capabilities that online zoom instruction provided: (1) having students read for meaning by summarizing and noting interesting points from their selected articles, (2) having students share what they read independently outside of class. The readings were summarized because as Park (2017) argues, reading speed is not meaningful when comprehension is neglected. The students could share in their L1, and when the students chose to share in their L2, the author interpreted key points in L1 as deemed necessary for comprehension. In support of this decision, Turnbull and Evans (2017) explored the effects of post-reading group discussions in both first and second languages on L2 comprehension and found that participants who discussed the texts in their L1 not only recalled the most textual elements and features across texts but also produced recalls in writing with the most words and discussed the broadest range of topics. Students who chose to do so shared in their L2 so they not only learn to understand written material in L2 but communicate what they read in their L2. Additionally, students chose what they were interested in and did not read the same materials in groups to help each other get exposure to reading various kinds of reading materials.

Although both timed reading and repeated oral reading is effective in promoting second language reading fluency (Shimono, 2018), *Reading for Speed and Fluency* (Nation, 2012) was made optional, because of COVID-19, and online versions of the initially required text

was unavailable. This decision is aligned with Ansarin, Farrokhi, and Mahboudi's (2017) claim that the usefulness of any method used in foreign language teaching is ultimately dependent on whether it is accepted by learners. One student who is taking the course for the third time and has continued with the series every semester has decided to complete the third level in the series (Nation, 2018) at his own will.

Phase 3: Getting Students to Become Autonomous Readers

The third phase entailed encouraging students to dig deeply into the topics that they are interested in to promote continued reading even after the end of the course. Chang and Millett's (2017) three-week study of EFL learners show that narrow reading, or a continuous reading of related texts, can help readers read significantly faster and comprehend more with the related text than the unrelated text. It was reasonable that if the students do decide to continue with reading after the end of the course, they will do so with the topics that they are interested in. During Phase 2, students selected and presented articles that they were interested in each week, and while their interest varied, many students' choices showed their individuality. For instance, one student was inclined to read extensively on the environment, whereas another student was inclined to read about international politics. During the final session, the students were asked to develop their own research question, identify two articles to help them answer their questions and write out their answers several days prior to presenting their answers in L1 or L2 within five minutes. The author made positive comments focusing on the value each student's presentation had on the learning experiences of other students. Finally, suggestions for the reading students could do after the end of the semester was made, including continuing with habitual reading of articles they are interested in, keeping a record of what they read, sharing with others, graded readers, and timed reading (Nation, 2012).

Implications: For Teachers Teaching EFL and for Undergraduate Students Learning EFL

The social circumstances such as COVID-19, classroom dynamics and the history of relationships with students, what is comfortable for each teacher can influence how teachers teach. With zoom instruction under COVID-19, challenges were observed for activities such as repeated reading practice and extensive reading in the author's course. With online teaching of reading for EFL students in the future, teachers in other EFL contexts can plan, but remain flexible as to how they will teach by (1) getting to know the students, (2) staying attuned to the students' needs, and (3) keeping in mind how teachers can best encourage students to be autonomous readers. Yilmaz, Atay, and Musftafa (2020) recommend that teachers help students create strong language learner self-images, because their self-concept significantly affect their attitudes, behaviors, and cognitive processes towards reading. Each teacher has the challenge of reflecting on his or her teaching and remain flexible and adaptable in terms of how to teach while keeping in mind how they can best help students with their reading. Two points of unwavering focus to suggest are: building a strong self-concept of reading and helping students to become closer to being autonomous readers.

Conclusion

Three phases for teaching a semester of a reading course for undergraduate students in Japan learning EFL during COVID-19 were outlined following implications on how teachers in other teaching contexts can adapt their teaching. The three phases entailed: getting to know

the students, staying attuned to the students' wants and needs, and getting students to become autonomous learners. Challenges due to COVID-19 and a sudden move from classroom teaching to online teaching was the difficulty in having students order and use textbooks, suggesting that it would be auspicious for teachers to have confidence in developing their own unwavering vision for teaching reading, which may include helping students build a strong self-concept of reading and helping students to become as autonomous a reader in the target language as possible considering a variety of social factors including teachers and students present in class. Arab and Benaissi (2019) found that students' poor reading habits were particularly because of the negative role of parents and the absence of effective reading programs, suggesting the value of teachers to also understand the EFL curriculum of the educational institution the teachers are at, and how students read outside of school.

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