

研究速報

Free Reading: Benefits, Variations and Possibilities

Ian STEVENSON

This article will review the role of free reading in the English Language Learning (ELL) classroom and the reasons for including free reading in the ELL classroom. These reasons include, but are not limited to, improved language acquisition, literacy skills and cultural knowledge. This article will discuss what free reading is, the benefits of free reading, the results of some recent research in Japan and the role that free reading can play for International College of Technology (ICT) students. This article is meant to provide a rationale and an overview of how free reading can provide a pathway to improving student English ability.

Keywords: Free Reading, Motivation, Collaborative activities, Bimodal approaches, IELTS, Standardized assessments

1. Introduction

Using free reading in the language learning classroom is not a new concept. For example, in the early 1980's a two-year study on the effect of free reading was conducted which demonstrated the positive impact that reading high-interest stories had on students' receptive and productive English language skills¹⁾. Other researchers have identified free voluntary reading as one of the most effective tools to learn a second or foreign language, as well as being the easiest and most pleasant tool for students to use. This has led to research showing that students who do more free reading develop better reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary skills^{2, 3)}.

First, what is free reading? In different studies, free reading has been called a variety of names, including book flood, voluntary reading, independent reading, leisure reading, spare time reading and recreational reading. However, whichever term is used, the key concept is that it is a type of reading that the students choose to do, either for interest or pleasure. For the purposes of this article, free reading will be defined as reading that is done by choice or reading that having begun at the instructor's request is continued due to the reader's interest in the material. The material and the medium of the reading is left to the reader to choose.

2. Reasons for free reading

There are many reasons for free reading in the language learning classroom. Some of the commonly cited reasons include language acquisition, literacy, psychological/motivational benefits and cultural knowledge.

Free reading encourages language acquisition through developing vocabulary by encountering new words and phrases in context multiple times. Also, the constant exposure to well-

structured sentence patterns allows students to internalize grammar and syntax. Some of these benefits can be seen improved language fluency, style and grammar in student language production. Free reading is a documented predictor of language acquisition with students who are doing free reading usually acquiring language quicker.

Consistent free reading practice improves reading speed and automaticity, as well as developing the ability to infer from context and make connections between ideas. This can lead to improved literacy by increasing reading fluency and comprehension. In turn, this can then result in better performance on standardized assessments such as the TOEFL and IELTS tests.

The psychological/motivational benefits derive from the fact that free reading is a low-stress environment, allowing students to practice language safely. Students are reading at the pace and difficulty level that they feel comfortable at, in topics that they are interested in, allowing them to take ownership of their own learning. Also, since the students are choosing texts that the students are interested in, it can help develop a love of reading and a reading habit that is not restricted to the classroom. A mindset that reading can be fun and not a task, while building student confidence in their ability and identity as a language learner.

Finally, there is the development of cultural or world knowledge. The benefits of this can include developing knowledge of other countries/cultures outside of their own, and, depending on the topic chosen, other subjects outside of a strictly language learning environment^{4, 5, 6}.

All these reasons are important to language learners, but they are of especial importance to ICT students, due to the demands (content in English, study overseas, etc.) placed on them. To meet these demands, students need to acquire and internalize language, connect and infer ideas from context, perform well on standardized assessments and develop an understanding and knowledge of other cultures. All of this can be developed through free reading.

3. Types of Free reading / Studies in Japan

As noted in the introduction, free reading has a variety of names. It also has a variety of iterations in practice and in response to culture and motivation. This section will discuss where motivation for Japanese students can come from and some of the different approaches to free reading that have been used in Japan over the last 10 to 15 years. These approaches include collaborative activities and bimodal approaches.

3.1. Motivation

Second language learners' motivation to participate is changeable and driven by different reasons. It could be influenced by the interest in and difficulty of the reading material, family or cultural attitudes towards how valuable reading is, as well as other academic factors. According to a series of case studies conducted at a Japanese high school, the motivation of Japanese readers in a free reading program was described as being in a state of constant change but remaining consistent in the desire to learn autonomously and a love of reading⁷.

3.2. Collaborative Activities

Collaborative activities are a way to get the benefits of free reading while also addressing issues of student motivation to participate in a free reading program. Adding collaborative components is seen as a way to keep students engaged in their own learning and their classmates' learning. In studies that examined this approach, activities such as face-to-face discussions and book clubs were used so that students would discuss their free reading with a classmate or classmates and listen to what their classmates had to say about their own free reading^{8, 9)}.

3.3. Bimodal Approaches

Bimodal approaches are approaches that let the reader use two ways to access the content. In this case, using online readers with an audio component so that the student can listen to as they read the material. Qualitative analysis of this research suggests that participants viewed the bimodal approach positively, claiming that it improved their comfort in reading in English, their vocabulary and reading skills^{10, 11)}.

4. Free reading at ICT

Recognizing both the power and the impact of free reading on language acquisition, it is part of the ICT curriculum, both inside and outside of classes and at both campuses. At some classes at Hakusanroku campus, time is set aside for free reading and discussion of the free reading with classmates. In other classes, there are extensive reading activities followed by written reflection. Out of class, four times a week during Learning Session, students read using materials from the SRA Reading Laboratory. SRA Reading Laboratory is a K-12 levelled reading program where students read at their level and track their progress throughout the year. Students at Kanazawa campus also take part in free reading activities, such as extensive reading followed by written reflection and extensive reading within an academic area of interest followed by group discussion of the topic.

5. What free reading could mean for ICT students

Besides the benefits mentioned in section 2, there are also the benefits that free reading can have across language skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking). As mentioned in the introduction, there has been research done on the impact that free reading has on skills other than reading. Elley and Mangubhai's research suggests that the benefits of free reading over a sustained period of time (their study was conducted over two years) leads to not only an early improvement in the receptive skills (listening and reading) but in the productive skills (writing and speaking) as well.¹⁾

An assessment that all ICT students have had to undergo since the school opened is the IELTS test. To achieve the higher bands of the test, skills such as the ability to discuss topics using simple and complex grammatical structures and to use a wide range of vocabulary are needed^{12, 13)}. These are skills that can be developed through consistent free reading over sustained period of time. Two years is the amount of time that most ICT students spend at Hakusanroku campus, and listening, reading, writing and speaking are the four sections of the IELTS test that they have had

to take before studying abroad. Two years is also the amount of time that most ICT students spend at Kanazawa campus before attending university. For those students that wish to attend an international university in Japan or an overseas university, this involves taking and achieving a score on an accepted assessment, such as the TOEFL or IELTS.

The IELTS test is something that ICT students have needed to prepare for. Free reading is a way that is both low-pressure and driven by student interest, to prepare for the IELTS and other standardized tests. Free reading is also way that ICT students can improve their English abilities and their confidence in using English.

6. Conclusion

Free reading has many types and uses many approaches. Despite the breadth of free reading's many forms, it remains a simple, effective and powerful tool in language acquisition. It can have both short-term and long-term benefits in the development of specific language skills, helping to instill a love of reading in students and a desire to learn more on their own and at their own pace. Providing free reading opportunities and materials to ICT students gives them the opportunity to become stronger readers and more independent learners.

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Ian STEVENSON
教授
国際高等専門学校
一般科目

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