

Combining Self-Generated Questions and Textbook Exercises for a Reading course

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1. Introduction

Choosing appropriate learning activities for improving students' English reading is of utmost importance for English teachers who want to organize lessons for maximizing students' benefits. Just as every activity consists of more than one learning element, it also affects more than one learning outcome. When asking whether a certain learning activity can be "effective", the wide-ranging consequences should be considered such as measures of accuracy, applicable skills and student attitudes, and logical items as student retention in academic programs. However, a homogeneous conclusion on how each activity impacts all of these learning outcomes is often not available, making comprehensive assessment difficult.

Historically, published textbooks have been widely accepted for teaching English as a foreign language since published textbooks seems well organized, suitable, and include superior input (Heilman et al., 2006). Published textbooks consist of different types of exercises such as vocabulary building, questions and answer exercises for reading comprehension, short answers for sentence writing, grammar practice, summary writing and so forth. On the other hand, Heilman et al. (2006) point out that published textbooks are static, difficult to produce, and limited in quantity. Textbooks are ready-made teaching materials, so they tend to dictate what is taught, in a purposeful order, and they have a huge impact on the way teachers use them (Kayapinar, 2009). Too much dependence on textbooks might discourage students to learn actively, yet textbooks are still helpful if they are used with appropriate strategies. Bloor (1985) stresses that the most essential concerns are where the approach brings about meaningful difference that improves the reading levels of the learners.

Rodríguez Torras (1991) notes that careful consideration is required prior to the curriculum development. He states that teaching will require great collaboration between the teacher of language and the teacher of content, and teachers need to constantly work at renovating the

curriculum, be well trained, and be well prepared to instruct students for better learning. University English lessons are often taught in a larger class setting, and teaching such a size requires different strategies for organizing lessons compared with a smaller size. Jones (2007) points out that in a larger class setting, organizing student-centered lessons is more necessary for giving students opportunities to interact with each other and work together. He mentions that while some activities such as discussion and role-play seem suitable for working together, some other tasks including writing, multiple-choice responses, and fill-the blank exercises could also be suitable and enjoyable when performed in pairs or groups.

One effective approach that enhances students' reading comprehension in a larger class setting is introducing self-generated questions that enables students to actively work for comprehension development and their comprehension evaluation (Singer, 1978; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Yeh & Lai, 2012). According to Yeh and Lai (2012), students worked actively while comprehending the text as they organized, created and evaluated questions with their peers. They also identified that assessing students' self-generated questions provided teachers with opportunities to give feedback to students to tap into their comprehension. Duke and Pearson (2002) studied the impact of students' self-generated questions on comprehension and they summarized two major benefits provided to students: (1) better understanding of the texts to which the procedures are applied, and (2) the development of an infrastructure of processes that will benefit them as they come across future texts, particularly texts that students must discuss on their own.

For measuring feasibility of the study, three criteria were used: (a) qualitative assessment of student projects, (b) students' academic scores for the course, and (c) student attitude surveys. Qualitative assessment of the student projects was conducted during creation of self-generated questions and after delivering the self-generated questions in class by a group of students. Students' academic scores were calculated at the end of the semester. Student attitude surveys that were designed by Shinshu University were also conducted online at the end of the semester.

In the light of the preceding arguments, in order to fully understand the place of a question-generation activity in English reading at a Japanese university, the following objectives of the study were targeted:

1. To examine the impact of self-generated questions on students
2. To discover the differences of attitudes of students
3. To assess the teacher's attitude towards her own treatment of evaluation of students.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 20 male and 9 female first-year undergraduate Education students from Shinshu University. These students took the course called “Freshmen Academic English” (FAE) of which the main purpose is reading and writing in English. The participants of the study all belonged to the intermediate course of FAE which was decided based on the results of the English component of the university entrance exam or a placement test conducted by Shinshu University prior to the academic year of 2013. The course duration is a year, and participants received separate course credits for the first semester and second semester. Their first language was Japanese. Participants were divided into groups of 4 or 5 students according to their preferred topic of reading material. Then, each group was assigned a given passage from the textbook.

2.2. Materials

Six units from an English textbook for university students called “Reading Fusion 2” written by Andrew E. Bennett, published by Nan’un-do were used for this study. The textbook has 15 units and each passage is 600 words long, and the first six units had been taught in the first semester of 2013. The book was continuously used for the second semester of 2013 in which this study was applied and implemented. The reason why six units were chosen was to cope with the course duration. Prior to choosing six passages from the textbook, the teacher conducted a survey regarding popularity of the topics in the textbook and the six most popular units out of nine were chosen. The chosen units covered different topics, namely (1) entertainment, (2) space, (3) culture, (4) health, (5) social issues and (6) globalization, that are informative and thought-provoking articles of current interest (Bennett, 2011). Each unit had accompanying exercises that cover the broad range of activities including (1) vocabulary warm-up, (2) reading passage, (3) reading comprehension, (4) short answers, (5) vocabulary building, (6) word parts, (7) grammar, (8) listening and (9) short reading passage. The teacher created supplementary material to assist students with sample questions for creating questions and answers for the assigned unit (See Table 1). “Question types” in the Moodle website explains a variety of different types of questions that can be used in the quiz and lesson. The set of example questions in the worksheet created by the teacher included (1) Yes/No question, (2) Either/or question, (3) multiple choice, (4) numeric open end, and (5) open end. Students were also given a vocabulary list of the assigned unit, for which they were asked to deliver a vocabulary workshop in class. Other than the reading textbook and the supplementary materials for reading, another textbook called “Basic Steps to Academic Writing, From Paragraph to Essay”, written by Matthew Taylor and David Kluge and

published by Cengage Learning, was used. However, this textbook was used for teaching writing, and it is not related to this study.

2.3. Instructions

The teacher introduced the purpose of the “self-generated questions” activity to the class. This activity can be done by groups outside the class and be used in the class, along with the textbook exercises that can be done individually. The teacher also explained that self-generated questions could provide more opportunities to read the unit passages from different aspects apart from the textbook exercises.

During the first and second weeks of the second semester, the teacher gave lectures introducing how to design good questions for reading comprehension and discussion. The teacher showed example questions for Unit 6, “Kidults”, in “Reading Fusion 2” (See Table 1). Students in the class had already learned the unit during the first semester.

The teacher explained that the questions they create cannot be the same as the questions in the textbook, and good questions provide more opportunities to read the unit passages from different aspects of textbook exercises.

Table 1. Example Questions

<p>1. Yes/No question Q: Are kidults ready to grow up? (A: No, they aren't. They refuse to grow up and avoiding responsibility.)</p> <p>2. Either/or Q: Are kidalts spending their disposable income on living or fun and games? (A: They are spending their disposable income on fun and games.)</p> <p>3. Multiple choice Q: Who suggested that kidults have an opportunity for self-improvement? A. Christopher Noxon B. James Core C. Cyndi Lauper D. Jeffrey Arnett (A: D. Jefferey Arnett)</p> <p>4. Numeric open end Q: In 2005, what was the average marriage age in Ireland? (A: 32.6)</p> <p>5. Open end Q: Do you think that you are a kidult? Why do you think so? (A: Answers vary.)</p>
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2.4. Procedure

Firstly, the participants in the course were asked to choose a preferred reading unit out of nine units from the textbook and based on that the whole class was divided into 6 groups of 4 or 5 students. Two weekly lectures were spent, on each unit, and each group was asked to prepare for (1) a vocabulary workshop and (2) self-generated questions. Belows are example schedules for studying each unit and how students of an assigned group, other students, and the teacher interacted for a unit.

Week 1

Prior to the first week, the students in the group assigned with the unit prepare for a vocabulary workshop, in which the group uses a projector and handouts to introduce part of speech, pronunciation, meaning in Japanese, and some other information such as synonyms and antonyms. Then, all the students in the class are given the list of vocabulary with Japanese translations. Homework is given from the textbook including vocabulary warm-up, reading passage, and reading comprehension and short answers. The group in charge of the unit is also required to generate questions for the unit. Before the next lesson, the group sends a copy of the set of self-generated questions to the teacher so that the teacher can check the questions and provide feedbacks to the students.

Week 2

At the beginning of the second week, the teacher organizes a vocabulary quiz for the target unit. Following the quiz, the group responsible for the studying unit asks the self-generated questions to the class. By this time, other students in the class have read the passage at least once and have finished some parts of exercises in the textbook. The teacher distributes the set of questions prepared by the group, and the remaining students in the class read the textbook aloud with their group members and find the answers for the given questions. The set of question includes one open-ended question that is for discussion. As a wrap-up activity, the whole class checks the answers to the questions and some students express their opinions on the discussion question. The remaining exercises in the textbook are done individually as their homework.

3. Results

3.1. Impact of Self-generated Questions on Students

At the end of each semester, Shinshu University conducts online student surveys to learn about students' attitudes and feedback about the subjects that they have studied. Table 2

shows the results from the surveys in the first and second semesters for the following question: “Did you spend more time outside class to understand the lesson content?” While 31.6% of students answered “Yes” for the first semester, 57.1% of students said “Yes” for the second semester. The difference between these numbers indicates that more students committed to study outside class during the second semester compared with the first semester.

Table 2. “Did you spend more time outside class to understand the lesson content?”

Did you spend more time outside class to understand the lesson content?	Semester	Yes	Somewhat yes	Neither yes nor no	Somewhat no	No
	1	31.6%	63.2%	5.3%	0%	0%
	2	57.1%	42.9%	0%	0%	0%

Table 3 shows the results from the following question: “Did you achieve the course objectives?” The result shows that 22.2 % students were not sure if they had achieved the course objectives for the first semester. However, 100% of students answered that they had “achieved” or “somewhat achieved” the course objectives for the second semester.

Table 3. “Did you achieve the course objectives?”

Did you achieve the course objectives?	Semester	Yes	Somewhat yes	Neither yes nor no	Somewhat no	No
	1	11.1%	66.7%	22.2%	0%	0%
	2	14.3%	85.7%	0%	0%	0%

Although these results are not purely feedback given for the reading part of the lessons, data indicate that students spent more time on self-study either with their group members or individually during the second semester, and there was an upsurge among the students to achieve the course objectives.

Table 4 shows the differences of academic scores between the first semester and the second semester. The academic scores do not represent solely the result given for the

reading ability of students. The scores reflect students’ academic performance of writing skills as well as other components of the course such as summary writing of TV news items, group and individual presentations, and attendance. Approximately two thirds of students improved their academic scores for the second semester compared with the first semester while one third of students worsened their scores or stayed static.

Table 4. Differences of academic scores between the first semester and second semester

Number (%) of students whose academic score for the second semester improved	Number (%) of students whose academic score for the second semester became worse	Number (%) of students whose academic score for the second semester stayed static
18 students (62.1%)	8 students (27.6%)	3 students (10.3%)

Results from tables 2, 3, and 4 show that students became more active in terms of learning outside the class, working together with their friends or individually, pursuing their study objectives, and many students improved their academic scores.

3.2. Differences of Attitudes of Students

Table 5 shows whether students thought their attendance rate for the course was high enough. The result indicates no students think that their attendance rate was low. However, the number of student who answered “Yes” decreased from 89.5% to 71.4% and those who answered “Somewhat yes” increased from 10.5% to 28.6%. It indicates that the number of students who missed one or a few lessons during the semester increased.

Table 5. Was your attendance rate for this course high enough?

Was your attendance rate for this course high enough?	Semester	Yes	Somewhat yes	Neither yes nor no	Somewhat no	No
	1	89.5%	10.5%	0%	0%	0%
	2	71.4%	28.6%	0%	0%	0%

The result does not explain why students missed lessons, but discussion between the teacher and students revealed that some students simply missed lessons because of (1)

their reluctance to study, (2) sickness, (3) family problems, or (4) some other individual matters.

Table 6 shows whether students were satisfied with the course. Although the number of students who answered “Yes” increased, the number of students who chose “Neither yes nor no” also increased. There are several factors that led to this result. The second semester had more group activities compared with the first semester, and students were required to spend more time to complete given tasks. In other words, their workload for the second semester was heavier than the first semester, and it might have caused some students to have a lower satisfaction level about the course. Another possible factor is that some students might have preferred to work individually to in a group. The teacher gave the same scores for the group assignments; each student’s effort and contribution was not fully taken into account for assessment. Consequently, these factors made some students feel unhappy about the course. Peer assessment should have been employed to understand the feeling and attitude of the students toward group activities.

Table 6. “Are you satisfied with this course?”

Are you satisfied with this course?	Semester	Yes	Somewhat yes	Neither yes nor no	Somewhat no	No
	1	33.3%	61.1%	5.6%	0%	0%
	2	50.0%	42.9%	7.1%	0%	0%

Although there was an improvement in students’ academic scores, it does not result in a higher level of satisfaction with the course.

3.3. Assessment of the teacher’s attitude towards her own treatment of evaluation of students

3.3.1. Qualitative assessment of the student projects

After the completion of each group project, the teacher gave scores for project completion. For a vocabulary workshop, immediate verbal feedback from the teacher was thought effective while a group was delivering a workshop. The teacher paid special attention to (1) preparation, (2) articulation, and (3) delivering accurate information about vocabulary.

Immediate verbal feedback pointed out the problems and solved them directly. As for self-generated questions, the teacher assessed the quality of questions and provided feedback to the students once or a few times via e-mail. One of the group members directly communicated with the teacher via e-mail. The teacher noticed some problems with self-generated questions such as (1) poor argument, (2) incomplete sentence, (3) verb form, (4) part of speech, (5) particle usage, (6) pronoun usage, (7) subject and verb agreement, and (8) spelling. While the teacher provided feedback on these problems to each group, the significance of such teacher-student transaction was not measured properly.

3.3.2. Students' academic scores for the course

As mentioned earlier, there was an upward trend of students' academic scores for the course. Combination of self-generated questions and text exercises contributed to (1) enhancing problem-solution skills for the given projects, (2) building learning skills in a group and individually, (3) improving reading comprehension, and (4) retaining learned vocabulary and grammar. However, a few students performed poorly on their mid- and final-exams, and these students were given supplementary tasks or had to sit for a makeup exam.

3.3.3. Student attitude surveys

Overall, the students in the class were cooperative and actively studied in class. Rather than too much teacher talk, the lesson provided lots of opportunities for students to work with each other. According to student attitude surveys, students preferred directly interacting with their friends, exchanging e-mails with their teacher, and being provided with useful materials for their study. However, because of the larger class size, not all the students had a chance to interact with their teacher thoroughly.

4. Conclusion

Setting up an appropriate goal of the reading course is fundamental to improve and enhance students' learning ability of English. At the same time, careful choice of the lesson materials, classroom activities and assignments is critical for well-designed lessons. Both self-generated questions and textbook exercises have proven useful, and in a larger classroom setting, organizing group activities boosts students' learning skills by interacting with their friends and the teacher. Although group work is an effective and feasible way to provide more opportunities for students to work closely with their friends, the teacher should ensure proper monitoring of students' work and fair assessment. Also, peer assessment should be incorporated into further studies. Self-generated questions enabled students to perform better

academically, and they also offered thoughtful input for better understanding of students, the textbook and other materials, and restructuring the course.

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