Extensive Reading Approached Critically With Literary Theory

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Abstract

This paper argues that English students need to acquire critical and cultural perspectives to achieve broader competence of graded readers, and outlines course design undertaken at a Japanese university where students were taught mediated, simplified literary criticism such as Marxism, Feminism and Post-colonialist theory. Learners were then encouraged to apply these theoretical reading approaches when discussing personally selected graded readers, and additionally when answering essay assignment questions about the meanings of the texts they had read. Corpus analysis of the vocabulary employed in these assignments discusses whether students were able to use such ideas to engage with graded readers more dynamically and analytically, while post course qualitative and quantitative questionnaire response data is also examined and discussed.

Keywords: Graded readers, extensive reading, critical reading

Introduction

Extensive reading has been argued to be a completely indispensable part of any language program (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe & Stroller, 2011). Instead of investing large amounts of time deconstructing a text`s constituent parts, comprehension skills are built through reading texts that are immediately comprehensible to the reader. Waring (2011) notes that extensive reading has a powerful effect on vocabulary development, whilst arguing that speaking and motivation are also boosted. Day and Bamford (2002) suggest a "book" a week is the minimum amount of extensive reading necessary to achieve such benefits, whilst also emphasizing the need for variety in the kinds of texts and genres available. Graded Readers thus seem well suited to the twin demands of comprehensibility and variety, having an ever increasing selection of texts in print, running from Elementary to Advanced levels.

Yet, whilst a great deal of research writing has focused on the importance of students having access to graded readers, little focus has been given to how such texts should be approached or read. Waring argues that the sole aim is to be "exposed to massive amounts of text" (2006, p. 46) while Krashen (1993) has said that *any* extensive reading is profitable, from simple action and romance stories to comprehensible adaptions of literary classics. Thus it would appear that while junk food is bad for one`s health, `junk reading` is good for one`s language acquisition. Others have taken issue with the notion that the sole targets of extensive reading should be improving vocabulary acquisition and comprehension skills. Whilst Prowse (n.d.) acknowledges that students should read books on their own for pleasure (in his Cambridge presentation *Is CILLL the new CLIL?*), he also criticizes Krashen's "junk reading" approach as misguided, placing too much focus on mechanical exercises and ensuring that culture is used to scaffold language learning in its meanest sense (Cambridge University Press ELT, 2010). Similarly, Corbett notes that traditional extensive reading misses a great opportunity by exploiting literature only "for its value in promoting language acquisition" (Corbett, 2003, p. 18). Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2001) maintain that priority should be allocated to developing intercultural communicative competence, so that, as Corbett (2003) also notes, the student becomes a mediator between cultures – a cultural diplomat "able to view different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding" (p. 3). In such an approach, the goal of language development "is wedded to the equally important aim of intercultural understanding" (2003, p. 2).

Thus, this paper argues that instead of cultural context in graded readers becoming a mere pretext for vocabulary acquisition, such content should be addressed, discussed and, if possible, critiqued, as part of a more enriched approach towards extensive reading. It is the potentially problematic cultural content of graded readers that this study will first turn its attention towards, before discussing ways in which reading students may acquire broader, and more critical, culturally competent reading skills. Finally, this paper will outline how such an approach was taught at a private university in Japan.

Cultural content in extensive reading

One of the most important criteria of extensive reading is that every English learner can find the best book for him/herself. In their *Top Ten Principles for*

Teaching Extensive Reading (2002), Day and Bamford stress the need for variety in graded reader offerings, and, reflecting this criterion, publishers such as Cambridge University Press, Longman Pearson Penguin, Macmillan, and Oxford University Press boast large catalogues. While the selections of graded readers available may be large, these collections often consist of a fair percentage of classic rather than modern works of fiction. This can of course have positive results; such graded readers allowing students to access `high` literature.

On the other hand, many graded reader titles reflect a Western centered, elitist and canonized standard, exemplified by F. R. Leavis' *The Great Tradition* (Leavis, 1950) in which he identified Anglo-American writers such as Eliot, Austen, and Henry James as the bearers of great and unchanging values. The works of such literary figures from the Western canon still pervade most modern graded reader selections. For example, a glance at the Penguin graded readers series reveals classic titles such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Round the World in 80 Days, The Turn of the Screw, Sense and Sensibility, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Moby Dick, Jude the Obscure, Sons and Lovers* and *The Phantom of the Opera.*

Even when read in a simplified format, classic works may present extensive reading students with comprehension problems which transcend vocabulary and syntactic awareness. Such works can be argued to adopt specific ideological positions, which may represent, promote, or exclude specific classes, genders, or cultural groups. A growing concern amongst some scholars is that, due to many English literary texts being saturated in Western cultural values, EFL students may potentially be encouraged to "analyse and evaluate the world as made and seen by Europeans" (Phillipson, 1992, p.241). Due to this, some EFL teachers are concerned that, by introducing texts by Shakespeare, Dickens, or Hughes into the language classroom, they are in some manner contributing to linguistic and cultural imperialism (Sell, 2005). In order to address this cultural problem, EFL reading classes could (and should) allocate some focus on the development of critical reading skills. Furthermore, equipping students with cultural awareness skills may also have a beneficial washback effect on language fluency, deeper cultural awareness being vital for achieving wider competence in today's world in English (Kramsch, 1993). It is the opinion of many that teachers should seek to equip their students with a deeper, more critical knowledge of the ideological discourses and hierarchies contained within narratives, thereby combining a quality with quantity

approach. Likewise, the ability to not only think about, but also write and discuss differing perspectives, practices, and values is a critical part of what Byram (1997) has coined "Intercultural Communicative Competence" and is seen by many as a core competency in any FL classroom.

Literary critical theory

Extensive reading students can be encouraged to develop the ability to evaluate and deconstruct graded reader texts more critically, and this approach could involve the introduction of aspects of literary theory, which has been largely subsumed by critical theory (Tallack, 1995). Indeed, the study of literature has now become part of a broader sociological and theoretical inquiry into cultural history and representation, and critical theories such as Marxism, Feminism and Postcolonialism offer a diverse set of methodologies, or ways of approaching and thinking about narratives. Applying a scaffolded, simplified literary critical theory approach to graded readers can potentially give foreign language students of English the ability to question issues of power and gender, and can help shed light on the practice of cultural representation. Such an approach may thus enable learners unacquainted with foreign cultures to more smoothly process problematic culture-specific schematic knowledge (Widdowson, 1990) encountered in texts, and articulate appropriate positions and views of their own.

Method

I decided to introduce a simplified, meditated literary critical theory to a class of 20 sophomore English reading students at a private Japanese university during the 2013 academic year. The students studied at an institution which employed the TOEFL testing system to decide class groupings, and the students had been placed in their class, which was listed as `middle level`, through achieving an average TOEFL score of 452. The students in this class were mandated 500 pages of extensive reading per semester, but were free to choose their own books from the large selection in the university library. At the end of the semester they had to choose their two favorite graded readers, and justify these choices in a discussion with their classmates, whilst further composing two essay assignments explaining and discussing the meanings of the texts. It was thus felt that with careful scaffolding such literary critical theory might enhance the students' appreciation of

the graded readers they chose, and gift them new conceptual thinking tools which may allow them to inhabit the texts at a deeper, more critical level.

Simplified theory and classroom practice

Whilst Kubota (1999) has noted that critical thinking is not the preserve of western cultural thought, and that Asian students find little difficulty in thinking critically in English, authentic literary critical theory, with its varying schools of thought and complex, dense vocabulary, is unquestionably an intimidating prospect for foreign students of English. Introducing some of the central conceptual ideas of critical theory required a teaching method that both simplified and crystallized important theoretical terms and language without oversimplifying or undermining its critical benefits. An approach was thus introduced which scaffolded mediated theory guided by specific vocabulary. This was influenced by Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey's (2001) critical and cross cultural comparative methodology, which advocates the employment of key terms and vocabulary to open up narrow textbook subjects and help learners discuss them more broadly.

Specific theoretical terms were introduced to the students through the distribution of vocabulary sheets, gap fills, word searches, multiple choice exercises and reading handouts which were recycled in subsequent classes in the form of discussion and writing activities. Audio-visual media such as short clips of movies and videos from YouTube, were used in conjunction with the vocabulary reading sheets to aid student familiarization of textual content (Lonergan, 1984), whilst images such as works of art were further employed to explicate meaning. During the 2013 academic year, three simplified literary critical theory approaches (Marxism, Feminism, and Post-colonialism) were scaffolded, and the following section will specifically focus on one of these teaching methods.

Teaching mediated post-colonialism

While Western literary cultural values emanate in part from the establishment of the literary canon, such values can also be traced back to specific historical and geopolitical processes which underpin the canon's formation, such as colonialism (Pennycook, 1998). Colonialist discourses such as depictions of civilised "self" and savage "other" can be discovered in the authentic literature of prominent Western writers such as Coleridge, Conrad, Kipling, and Maugham, and can also be

found in graded readers such as *Robinson Crusoe* by Defoe, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Twain, and *Round the World in 80 Days* by Verne.

In order that reading students might be able to recognize and critique these discourses, mediated Post-colonial criticism was introduced. Simplified reading handouts were distributed containing some of the basic ideas and figures from postcolonial criticism, such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, and related vocabulary such as "cultural conflict," "oppress," "exploit," "stereotype," "self," "other, and "cultural hegemony". The notion of "self" and "other" as a set of created cultural dispositions in Western culture was further explicated through using visual media. Paintings such as Delacroix's *Massacre at Chios* (1824), and example video clips such as *True Lies*, (featuring a crudely pejorative representation of Arabs as terrorists) which is featured in the short documentary movie *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (ChallengingMedia, 2007), were employed to illustrate how Western culture has negatively represented the Middle East over a long historical period up to the present. After being familiarised with these materials students were asked to answer eight postcolonial vocabulary-centered questions (see Figure 1.) to discuss whether they contained cultural differences or stereotypes, representations of self and other, and whether the works supported or criticized cultural hegemony.

1) What was the nationality or cultural background of the characters?
2) Was there cultural conflict between any of the characters? Who?
3) What was the cause of the cultural conflict?
4) Who benefitted from the cultural conflict?
5) Who was oppressed/exploited because of the cultural conflict?
6) What was the resolution of the cultural conflict?
7) Were any of the characters represented as a stereotype or `other`?
8) In your opinion does the story reinforce (support) or subvert (criticize) cultural hegemony (power)?

Figure 1. Example of Post Colonial Reading Questions.

As my students were Japanese, however, I also wanted them to consider these ideas in specific relation to their own cultural context and perspective, discussing how the West may have culturally represented Japan, and vice versa. My students read a short extract from the authentic text of Lafcadio Hearn's 19th century An Attempt at Interpretation (1904), which perpetuated a myopic, highly romanticised representation of Japan. In Chaper 2, entitled `Strangeness and Charm,` Hearn talked of "queer small streets full of odd small people, wearing robes and sandals of extraordinary shapes" (Hearn, 1904, p. 10). The students next read a short passage from the English translation of Natsume Soseki`s Kokoro, which concerns the tension that exists between the individual and the group in Japanese society. The protagonist, Sensei, is first identified as personifying isolation by his association with a Westerner, whose `careless` actions are described as "particularly strange" and as "quite extraordinary" (Soseki, 1957/2000, p. 4). Thus the Japanese in Hearn`s text and the Westerner in Soseki`s narrative are arguably depicted strangely as a type of stereotype, or `other.` My students then discussed these two short extracts in specific relation to questions 1, 7 and 8 (see Figure 1). I encouraged their conversation to center specifically on how the two texts represented Western and Japanese cultures, and whether the two texts potentially reinforced or subverted Western and Japanese cultural hegemony. In the following class my students were encouraged to employ as many of the eight questions as were applicable to discuss with their classmates the most recent graded readers they had read.

Statistical procedures

In order to evaluate this literary theory approach towards a more critical comprehension of texts, statistical research was undertaken. This research incorporated corpus analysis and distributing a post course quantitative/qualitative student response questionnaire. It was hoped that by measuring the students' attitudes, an overall barometer of the effectiveness of the materials used could be established. Furthermore, the students' graded reader essays were collected into a corpus which was employed to assess whether and how students used the literary theory vocabulary they had acquired when writing about graded readers.

Graded reader assignment corpus

I wished to examine the ways in which students applied the literary critical theory they had learnt in relation to the graded readers they had read. Over the course of the semester the twenty students were mandated two essays each. For both of these assignments they were requested to submit a 400 word (minimum) critical review of a graded reader of their choice by answering three questions: "Explain the behaviour of the characters in the story", "State the main idea or theme of the story" and "Discuss the final meaning or message of the story."

These 40 essays were sent to the teacher by email, and subjected to examination by the text-handling package, *Wordsmith Tools*. Whilst the collection of written corpora was very small, Millar notes that a DIY corpus creation can be carried out quickly through the creation of a small corpus, based on a class assignment (2010, p. 69), and that such specialized corpora can provide information about more specific types of language use, such as for academic or professional purposes. The first assessment criterion was a word frequency list that would provide the study with words in alphabetical and frequency order.

The second assessment criterion was to evaluate how specific acquired vocabulary was employed in concordance with other lexical items. Concordance analysis can give the teacher a better understanding of how students are using that particular feature (Millar, 2010, p. 66). Word frequency and concordance analysis can therefore be employed to see how the phrases and words learnt by the students are actually being used productively. It was therefore hoped that this approach would allow a better analysis of student understanding and utilization of content vocabulary.

Student quantitative and qualitative questions

The six quantitative questions (see Table 2; Appendix) were based on the Likert close-ended question model, but with four response options. An example question is given below:

How interesting were the reading theories taught in class?			
a) interesting	b) okay	c) uninteresting	d) boring

Figure 2. Example close-ended question from the questionnaire.

In the above example, *interesting* was assigned a score of 4 points, and *okay* a score of 3 points. These were the two positive responses. *Uninteresting* was given a response score of 2, and *boring* a score of 1.The latter two were the two negative responses. The students were also asked two qualitative questions during the post-reading section of the research (see Appendix). Whilst it has been noted that such qualitative questions possess inherent limitations, Dornyei (2010) observes that they also enjoy specific merits such as providing greater graphic and illustrative richness to pure quantitative data. Such data was therefore employed to facilitate and potentially deepen the quantitative questionnaire measures.

Discussion

Corpus of student writing

Corpus analysis yielded a selection of literary theory-related key words produced by my 20 students in their two essay assignments, and thus revealed a 'sense' of how well they were able to understand it and use it productively in relation to graded readers. In total, the corpus contained 19,335 words (2,336 different word types), and 860 of the total words used by my students were literary theory related, amounting to 4.44% of the total number of words used in the corpus (see Table 1. below).

Table 1. Corpus Findings.

Word Types = 2,336	Lit. Theory Vocab = 40
Word Tokens = 19,335	Course Vocab Tokens = 860
4.44% of the words used were literary theory specific terms.	

Furthermore, the "KeyWord" function in *Wordsmith* afforded the chance to uncover unusually frequent words in the corpus. Perhaps not unexpectedly, the word "hegemony", which could be employed to discuss all three of the critical theories taught (Marxism, Feminism and Post Colonialism) was the most frequent key content word in the corpus, appearing 50 times in my students' collection of writing. Employing *Wordsmith's* concordance facility, it was learnt that "hegemony" was used with "capitalist" 12 times (Marxism), "masculine" 13 times (Feminism), and, in relation to Post-colonialist theory (the focus of this paper), students used the patterns "colonial hegemony" 10 times, "subvert hegemony" 14 times, and "reinforce hegemony" 7 times. Furthermore, the concord function highlighted several interesting sentence collocations in relation to Post-colonialism, illustrating how students employed patterns such as "reinforce cultural hegemony" with books such as the *Tom Sawyer* graded reader by Mark Twain, or *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, while further juxtaposing words such as "stereotype" and "other" with characters such as Injun Joe (a highly pejorative representation of a native American Indian character) and Fagin (a negative portrayal of a Jewish immigrant in London). In some of these cases, therefore, students were able to use the simplified theory to gain a sense of the cultural and hierarchical position of the text.

Discussion of quantitative questionnaire findings

As shown in Table 2, the students found the course theories highly interesting, giving them a very strong 3.85. This was comprised of individual characteristics such as the students' opinion of the course reading handouts (mean 3.55), and the audio-visual materials (mean 3.80). The students also rated the usefulness of the course theories for discussing and writing about the graded readers (3.50) and for understanding the meanings of the stories (3.30) fairly highly. This suggests that despite the students being designated as middle or average level, the theoretical materials were comprehensible across the spectrum of the class, fulfilling one of the central aims of the project. However, despite the methods and approaches scoring highly, question number two, which concerned students' critical comprehension of course theories and ideas, scored a fairly low mean value of 2.30. This low response, however, may have occurred due to the challenging nature of the topics studied, and this can, as noted by Dornyei, also be attributed to the phenom-

enon of students providing conservative or less than accurate responses when asked for direct self assessments of ability and progress (2010, p. 8).

Table 2. Final Mean Ratings of Students' Responses.

1) How interesting were the reading theories taught in class?	3.85
2) How well did you understand the course reading theories?	2.30
3) How useful were the course reading handouts for helping your understanding of the course theories?	3.55
4) How useful were the audio and visual materials in helping your understanding of the course theories?	3.80
5) Did the course reading theories help you write about and discuss the graded readers you read?	3.50
6) How useful were the course reading theories and ideas for understanding the meaning of the graded readers you read?	3.30

Qualitative questionnaire findings

Whilst five of the six quantitative questions required the students to assess the class teaching methods and approaches, question number two necessitated the students assessing themselves, and Young, cited in Ohata (2005), observed that student negativity can arise through "a lack of self confidence in language proficiency" (p.14). The qualitative data results reinforced this point; for question number seven, students were asked "If you didn't understand the course reading theories, why not?" Replies ranged from answers such as "I am not confident in my English," "My listening and reading skills needs to improve," "Video was easy to understand but reading stories is more difficult," and "I didn't get test results yet so I don't know how I did." This qualitative data seems to indicate that

students' anxiety regarding their general progress, or perceived lack of progress, in English was clouding their quantitative self-assessment.

However, more positively, for question number eight, when students were asked, "Has your ability to think more critically about graded readers improved or not improved because of this course?" 78% replied that they felt they had improved, whilst only 22% replied that they hadn't. Affirmative replies included comments such as "I could learn new way of thinking through reading," "I improved because of three types of thinking," "I could get the opportunity to read stories more deeply," and, conversely, "No, I`d like to learn more about theory," indicating that such theoretical ideas were not beyond the grasp or indeed the interest of students, and possessed a perceived usefulness for extensive reading.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that while even simplified graded readers are often culturally charged, and contain differing and often stereotypical representations of class, gender and cultures, these factors needn't obstruct students from engaging with them critically and creatively through the use of mediated literary critical theory. Keyword and concord analysis undertaken on student essays illustrated that a great deal of the vocabulary they used in specific relation to discussing and critiquing graded readers was connected to ideas scaffolded during the course. Furthermore, qualitative and quantitative questionnaire research suggested a student appreciation of the usefulness of this approach for understanding, discussing and reviewing the books that they read, and also indicated a possible desire for more theory to be introduced.

Yet, for the present, this study can only be judged as a pilot project, serving as a signpost towards future, more rigorous, approaches. Whilst it is too early, however, to draw any substantial conclusions regarding a deeper student understanding of graded readers, it is hoped that this small pool of collected data can be employed in the future as part of a longitudinal collection of student writings which will help shape a more detailed extensive reading research project. It is argued that encouraging students to use mediated literary theory to critically assess and compare wide selections of graded readers within a reading syllabus is potentially beneficial in a number of ways, aiding students' broader comprehension of the cultural and ideological positions in narratives and helping to develop Intercultural Com-

municative Competence. Thus while an "anything goes" quantitative approach may extend students` English vocabulary range, this can be complemented by employing a more critical, extensive reading approach, yielding a number of subtly useful benefits.

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Appendix

Extensive Reading 2013 Questionnaire

1) How interesting were the reading theories taught in class?

a) interesting b) okay c) uninteresting d) boring

2) How well did you understand the course reading theories?

a) very easy to understand b) quite easy to understand

c) a little difficult to understand d) difficult to understand

3) How useful were the course reading handouts for helping your understanding of the course theories?

a) very useful b) useful c) a little useful d) not useful

4) How useful were the audio and visual materials in helping your understanding of the course theories?

a) very useful b) useful c) a little useful d) not useful

5) Did the course reading theories help you write about and discuss the graded readers you read?

a) yes definitely b) yes, a little c) not really d) definitely not

6) How useful were the course reading theories and ideas for understanding the meaning of the graded readers you read?

a) very useful b) useful c) a little useful d) not useful

7) If you didn't understand the course reading theories, why not?

8) Has your ability to think more critically about graded readers improved or not improved because of this course?