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Cooperative Pair Work and EFL Learners’ Performance on a Form-focused Task

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Abstract

The present study was carried out to investigate the effect of pair work on a cloze elide task in two EFL classes. To this end, sixty-three adult learners formed an experimental and a comparison group. Both groups performed the same task in pairs. However, the nature of their pair work was different. While the participants in the experimental group were instructed to do the assigned task through the formulate-share-listen-create cooperative learning structure by receiving some training, the participants in the comparison group did the pair work without any training. Results of the data analysis indicated that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on the given task. This suggests that dividing learners into pairs and giving them a task to do is nothing but pseudo pair work unless it is informed by cooperative learning principles and conditions.

Keywords: cooperative learning, collaboration, pair work

Introduction

In recent years, pair and small group work activities have been increasingly used in foreign language classrooms. This is partly due to the emergence of communicative language teaching goals and these accord great importance to developing communicative competence. The emphasis is also partly due to the proliferation of educational models and textbooks that promote cooperative learning and peer interaction, and the changing nature of work in the information age.

Proponents of using pair work argue that it provides learners with more time to speak (Harmer, 2007), promotes learner motivation, responsibility, and autonomy, and helps them feel less anxious and more confident while speaking (Brown, 2001).

Though pair work is a powerful pedagogical tool that facilitates learning by fostering cooperation among learners, it should not be thought of as Aladdin’s
magic lamp to perform miracles. Teachers should realize that dividing learners into pairs and giving them a task to do without consideration of basic cooperative learning principles amounts to nothing but pseudo (untrained, unprepared) pair work. The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to examine whether cooperative pair work improves EFL learners’ performance better than pseudo pair work when it comes to a form-focused task. Before this, however, we need to briefly review the basic principles of cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning

Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1994) define cooperative learning as “the instructional use of small groups [two people or more] through which students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning” (p. 4). They further posit that cooperative learning incorporates five important elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, collaborative skills, and group processing.

Positive interdependence is present when all group members’ contributions are needed to achieve a shared goal. In other words, they should learn that they sink or swim together. Individual accountability ensures that although the task is group-oriented, each member of the group is held responsible to participate and help other group members accomplish the task. Therefore, teachers should know how to assess each member of the group and give feedback on his or her progress so that it becomes clear who needs further support and assistance. Face-to-face interaction requires participants to do real work in real time together, thus promoting communicative competence and each other’s success. The fourth element of cooperative learning requires that students be taught and encouraged to use necessary collaborative skills such as asking for help, giving reasons, disagreeing politely, active listening, etc. And finally, group processing structures the process such that group members must review, evaluate, and reflect upon their work together to bring about the necessary changes as to which actions should continue and which actions should stop or be changed. Such structure promotes additional communication in the target language.

Another important aspect of cooperative learning is the task structure itself, namely ways of organizing the interaction in the classroom (Kagan & Kagan 2009). Structuring often involves a series of steps which clearly describe what
learners should do at each stage. Several well-known cooperative learning structures, based on Olsen and Kagan (1992) and Williams (2002) are as follows:

**Numbered Heads Together.** This is a four-step procedure in which students number off within groups, say 1, 2, 3, or 4 if they are in groups of four (Step 1); the teacher asks them a question such as “Can you show the difference between gaze and stare through an example?” (Step 2); students work cooperatively to come up with a good example (Step 3); and the teacher calls a number from 1 to 4 and only students with the called number can raise their hands to answer the question (Step 4).

**Think-Pair-Share.** This is a three-step structure in which students in each pair or group individually think about a given question or problem for a few minutes (Step 1) pair up with a partner (Step 2), and share their answers with other pairs or with the class (Step 3).

**Formulate-Share-Listen-Create.** This is a four-step refinement of the Think-Pair-Share technique in which students in each pair individually formulate a response to a given question or problem (Step 1), share their thinking with a partner (Step 2), listen carefully to what their partner has come up with (Step 3), and create a response that is more refined than either of the individual responses.

**Possible disadvantages**

Despite much success with cooperative tasks, many teachers complain that pair work, particularly in large classes, is noisy and encourages learners to fall back on their mother tongue. While there is some truth in these complaints, it should be mentioned that they are managerial issues that can be overcome and hence should not discourage teachers.

Of course, too much noise can cause teachers to lose control of the class, and may disturb neighboring classes. However, teachers who are concerned about the noise level can follow the suggested activities offered by Kagan and Kagan (2009) such as using stoplight cards. Using this technique, the teacher shows a green card to the pairs whose voice level is fine, a yellow card to those who need to quiet down a bit, and a red card to those who need to become completely silent and count to ten before starting work again.
The second disadvantage of using pair work identified by some teachers is that it may encourage the use of the learners’ mother tongue. For this reason, many conscientious teachers often feel guilty about using pair work in their classes. However, as Storch and Aldosari (2010) have recently remarked, when learners are assigned to work in pairs or small groups, they tend to use their mother tongue “judiciously,” particularly “for a range of functions deemed helpful for language learning” (p. 358) such as task management, generating ideas, and lexical and grammatical deliberations. Therefore, language teachers need not worry about the learners’ use of their mother tongue so much in pair work activities.

**Pair work and form-focused activities**

In recent years, investigating the effect of pair and small group work on form-focused activities like text-editing, grammatical cloze, and so forth, has been the topic of a number of intriguing studies. Storch (2007), for instance, investigated the differential effects of pair and individual work on a text-editing task in an ESL setting. Her findings revealed that there were no significant differences in the mean accuracy score of texts which the participants had edited collaboratively compared to those which they had edited individually. However, further analysis of the transcribed conversations showed that pair work had been useful to students in that it prompted them to reflect on language through a number of interactional moves such as seeking confirmation or requesting for clarifications. One must look to the process as well as the product for language learning benefits.

The performance of EFL learners on pair work versus individual work was compared in another study (Baleghizadeh, 2009). The task at hand was a cloze elide with three types of blanks: prepositions, articles, and coordinating conjunctions. The results revealed that the participants who completed the task in pairs outperformed those who worked individually. However, further analysis revealed differences on the three grammatical forms. While the participants in the experimental group outperformed their peers in the control group on articles and prepositions, their performance on coordinating conjunctions did not significantly differ. It was concluded that this might be due to the complex nature of grammar rules related to articles and prepositions compared to the simpler rules governing the use of coordinating conjunctions.
Comparison between pair and individual work on a word-formation task was the topic of another study (Baleghizadeh, 2010). In this study, the participants were asked to complete two texts by adding prefixes and suffixes to a number of given words. The participants in the experimental group did this in pairs through the Think-Pair-Share cooperative learning structure, while the participants in the control group did it individually. The results confirmed the superior performance of the experimental group.

Most recently, Baleghizadeh (2012) compared the differential performance of two groups of English for general academic purposes (EGAP) students on a vocabulary gap-fill activity in an EFL setting. The participants in the comparison group were asked to choose a partner and do the assigned task without receiving any instruction on what cooperative learning is (traditional, pseudo pair work). The participants in the experimental group, on the other hand, were informed of the elements of cooperative learning prior to doing the activity, namely having a shared goal, individual accountability, etc., hence forming true (trained) cooperative pairs. The results indicated that the experimental group significantly outperformed the comparison group.

**Rationale**

There are a number of points that should be observed based on the above studies. First, all of them involved an experimental group that completed the given task in pairs, and a control or comparison group that performed the same task individually. Secondly, almost all of them reported a beneficial effect for the role of pair work. Finally and most importantly, in only two studies (Baleghizadeh, 2010, 2012) did the participants in the experimental group work in a truly cooperative way. Although in the rest of the studies, the learners worked in pairs, their pair work did not follow any of the cooperative learning structures and hence must be described merely as pseudo pair work. It appears, then, that most research exemplifies one of two learning conditions: one characterized by groups formed to do structured work informed by cooperative learning elements (cooperative pairs) and the other by groups formed to do haphazard pair work (pseudo pairs). To date, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, there has been no study reported in the literature that has compared the performance of learners in these two learning conditions. Even in Baleghizadeh’s 2012 study, the cooperative group met only one
of the conditions, namely although they were informed of cooperative learning elements, they did not do structured pair work. Given this, there is obviously a need for a study that compares the effect of truly cooperative pair work, (particularly through unexplored cooperative structures such as formulate-share-listen-create), with pseudo pair work on a form-focused task. Therefore, the present study was conducted to explore the following research question: Do EFL learners who use cooperative pair work through the formulate-share-listen-create pattern perform better on a cloze elide task than those who do it through pseudo pair work?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 63 adult students (43 females and 20 males) who were in their first year of studies in the 4-year English Language and Literature degree program at Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. The participants’ mean age was 19 and their average English language proficiency, based on IELTS band scores, was 6.5. The participants were members of intact classes randomly assigned to either the experimental (n=40) or comparison (n=23) group. The participants were taking a grammar course taught by the author at the time of the experiment. All the participants were informed that they were taking part in a research study, which they all consented to. The data were collected in the ninth and tenth weeks of the semester for the comparison and experimental groups, respectively.

Task

A cloze elide task, partially modified from CAE Practice Tests: Plus 2 by Stanton and Morris (1999), was used to collect the data. Unlike an ordinary cloze, where there are gaps to be filled in, a cloze elide is a text in which learners must identify a number of intentionally inserted words which make the passage ungrammatical. There are three reasons for selecting a cloze elide task as the data collection instrument for this study. First, a cloze elide, though widely used in Cambridge ESOL examinations, is a relatively underexplored form-focused task in research studies. Second, it is objectively scored and hence eliminates the need for a second rater. Third, cloze elide tasks are almost never used in the context of the present research. Thus, the researcher’s assumption was that this novelty would enhance the participants’ motivation. The cloze elide task used in the present study was an
18-numbered-line text in which there was an extra word inserted in some of the lines (see Appendix A for a portion of it). Traditionally, learners are asked to go through the text and put a tick next to the lines that were correct and identify the unnecessary word in the ungrammatical lines by writing them in the given spaces.

**Procedure**

The participants in both groups were asked to do the task in pairs. One session prior to the experiment, the author explained the elements of cooperative learning to the participants in the experimental group. He told them that each pair should submit a satisfactory, high-quality piece of work which is the product of two heads working together cooperatively. In addition, he reminded them of the value of certain collaborative skills such as active listening, seeking and offering help, disagreeing politely, explaining, praising, and encouraging.

During the next class session, on the day of the experiment, the participants were asked to form self-selected pairs. The participants in each pair were given two copies of the cloze elide task, However, to observe the principle of pursuing a shared goal, they were asked to submit only one final copy as the final product of their joint work. Thus, although there were 40 participants in the experimental group, the final data collected from them consisted of 20 copies. The participants in the experimental group were also instructed to follow the formulate-share-listen-create cooperative learning structure. Accordingly, they were asked to:

- formulate their answer to each item individually
- share their answers with their partner
- Listen carefully and attentively to their partner’s answer, noting similarities and differences in their answers
- Create a joint answer as the outcome of the best of both partners’ ideas

Hence, it can be argued that the pairs in the experimental group were truly cooperative pairs for several reasons. First, they were aware of cooperative learning principles, second, they produced a joint work, namely something that was better than what each member would have been able to produce individually, and thirdly (and more importantly), their joint effort was informed by a proven cooperative learning structure.

The participants in the comparison group were also instructed to form self-selected pairs, (and one small group of three, as the group consisted of 23 in total).
Like the participants in the experimental group, they each received one copy of the same cloze elide task. They were neither informed of cooperative learning structures nor asked to submit a joint production. They were merely told to work in pairs, perform the assigned task, and submit their own copy. In this way, the data collected from the comparison group consisted of 23 copies.

The participants were given as much time as they needed to complete the task. The researcher also asked the participants to voluntarily audiotape their pair talks with their cell phones. Fortunately, three pairs in the experimental group and four pairs in the comparison group volunteered to do so.

Statistical analysis

Since there were only two groups involved in the study, a t-test was used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the mean score of the experimental and comparison groups. The statistical analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) with alpha set at .05.

Results

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for both the experimental and the comparison groups.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for experimental and comparison groups

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The results indicate a slight advantage for the experimental pair work and result of the t-test indicated that the difference was significant: \( t(41) = 3.45, p = .001 \), Cohen’s \( d = 1.43 \). This indicates that the learners who completed the cloze elide task through the cooperative learning structure of “formulate-share-listen-create” had a more successful performance than the learners who did unplanned, non-structured pair work. The research question of the study was answered in the positive.
Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of cooperative pair work on form-focused activities in EFL classes. To this end, the performance of two groups of EFL learners on a cloze elide task was compared under two conditions: cooperative pair work versus pseudo pair work. The first condition was characterized by producing joint work following the formulate-share-listen-create cooperative learning structure, while the second was marked by non-structured pair work with no joint production. The findings indicated that the first condition proved to be more effective than the second condition. There are two reasons that can account for this difference.

The first reason is related to the collaborative skills such as active listening, giving reasons, encouraging, etc. that the participants in the experimental group were taught to employ. As mentioned before, one session prior to the experiment, the participants in the experimental group received some training in using several collaborative skills, particularly in active listening. This is because effective communication and understanding largely depends on listening carefully. The participants were told that active listening indicates that they are closely following their partner and encourages him or her to keep talking. To ensure this, they were given several guidelines such as facing their partner, encouraging him or her to continue by short verbal comments such ‘You are right’ or ‘Go ahead, please’, offering positive facial expressions such as a nod or a smile, being aware of their body language by not crossing their arms, and reflecting on what they have heard by paraphrasing. Active listening was also emphasized because it was one of the steps involved in the formulate-share-listen-create structure that required the participants to listen carefully to their partner’s answers and suggestions before coming up with a joint response.

The second reason for the significantly better performance of the participants in the experimental group is related to the nature of the conversations that they produced as a result of making a joint production. Based on the researcher’s observation, the participants in the experimental group produced partially longer and more sophisticated interactional exchanges than their counterparts in the comparison group. The joint work that the participants in the experimental group were supposed to create encouraged them to talk more and exchange further information. Indeed, results showed that the experimental pairs averaged 17 minutes of in-
action in accomplishing the task, while the comparison groups averaged only 13 minutes. An examination of the recorded interactions revealed that the participants in the comparison group talked very little and talk only occurred when they came across a difficulty. The following excerpts exemplify the difference.

**Excerpt 1 (from the experimental group)**

S1: Which word do you choose for number 8?
S2: I think we should say after that at college. Is this your answer?
S1: No, we shouldn’t add words, we should omit wrong words.
S2: Oh, excellent you are right, I forgot it. So what’s your answer?
S1: After is wrong word, it shouldn’t be here. At college is place, we can’t bring it after *after*.
S2: So at college, I worked for a number of years, umm, this is correct. I said after that at college, I forgot to omit this wrong word.

**Excerpt 2 (from the comparison group)**

S3: Is number 6 I or after?
S4: I is OK. After is wrong. We can omit I but it’s also correct.

The above excerpts are both related to the eighth line of the cloze elide task (see Appendix). It is obvious that the participants in the first extract are engaged in a more elaborate exchange of information. S2 is adding a word to the text to fix the error, and S1 reminds her that they ought to remove the unnecessary words from the text rather than add new words. Moreover, S2’s response ‘Oh, excellent you are right … So what’s your answer?’ also suggests that she is listening actively to her partner as she is eagerly encouraging her to proceed. This is in sharp contrast to the short conversation between S3 and S4 over the same item. S3 is asking whether ‘I’ or ‘after’ is the unnecessary word to be omitted and S4 simply responds that ‘after’ is the word to be removed. This lack of interest in having a lengthier conversation, a distinct feature of interactions exchanged between most pairs in the comparison group, is most likely due to the fact that they were busy completing their own task sheet and did not feel that they needed to share their responses with a partner for a shared goal.
Conclusion

The findings of this small scale study suggest that the performance of EFL learners on a form-focused task can improve when they have been prepared to work in truly cooperative ways. The main implication that can be drawn from this is that merely dividing learners into pairs and giving them something to do is nothing but pseudo pair work. To qualify as cooperative pair work, teachers should ensure that a number of conditions are met. First, the pairs or groups should be aware of why they are working together. This can be ensured through making them aware of cooperative learning and its benefits. For example, it is important that learners realize the value of listening carefully to each other, as it is an important source of learning. Second, the groups should be given some guidelines as to the steps they should go through while working together. This can be achieved by having them work through one of the cooperative learning structures such as think-pair-share or formulate-share-listen-create. Third, groups should be encouraged to submit a joint production. Although they may receive individual copies of the task sheet, they should be advised to pool their knowledge together and create one final copy which represents their joint thinking and effort.

Finally, as with most small scale studies, this study has a number of limitations, suggesting that caution should be exercised while interpreting the findings. Apart from the limited number of the participants and the very few items under investigation, the present study revealed only a small (albeit significant) difference in performance. Further research ought to involve a greater number of items on the task instrument. Furthermore, scores alone do not accurately reflect all of the possible language learning benefits. More detailed analysis of the quality and quantity of interaction during the process of completing the task may reveal far more important advantages. In EFL settings, learners often suffer from a lack of sufficient opportunities to proceduralize their knowledge via communicative use of the target language. Sometimes the process is more important than the product.

This study also suffers from lack of a third group in which the learners could have done the same task individually. In the absence of this third group, it is not possible to determine whether pseudo pair work has any advantages over individual work.
References


About the Author

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Appendix
(A Part of the Cloze Elide Task)

In most lines of the following text, there is one unnecessary word. It is either grammatically incorrect or does not fit in with the sense of the text. For each numbered line, find the unnecessary word and then write it in the space on the left. You can indicate the lines that are correct with a (√).

Starting Over Again

1 ………. Ever since I can remember, I have always loved to draw. When I
2 ………. was very young, I scribbled all them over my bedroom walls until I
3 ………. mastered paper and pencil. Later, from an enlightened schoolteacher
4 ………. made sure of that I went on to art school and it was there that I
5 ………. drew my first life model, which was a such wonderful experience.
6 ………. My tutors encouraged me to take up drawing and seriously, but I
7 ………. ignored again their advice. I wanted to do something more exciting
8 ………. as a career and I chose graphic design. After at college, I worked
9 ………. for a number of years as Art Director at a small publishing company.
Abstract
This study investigated the vocabulary growth of low-proficiency, tertiary-level students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Graded readers, and activities based on the task-induced Involvement Load Hypothesis (ILH) proposed by Hulstijn & Laufer (2001), were used. Through a preliminary test of the first 1,000 English words (Nation, 1993), 180 students were chosen from different majors. The first group of 60 students read graded readers. The second group of 60 students was given graded readers in addition to having the teacher’s read the material aloud. The third group read the graded readers and wrote compositions that incorporated the target words. Based on the ILH, it was predicted the third group’s vocabulary would improve the most after reading the graded readers and writing compositions. The study lasted for six months, during which all three tasks were conducted two times. A vocabulary test designed to assess the form recall was used as the research instrument. Statistical analysis of the data showed that, in line with the hypothesis, the third group’s vocabulary increased the most immediately after tasks. However, the benefits of repeated tasks did not hold for the participants, and even the task with the highest degree of involvement suffered a significant decrease in recalling the form of target words after a two month period. This study offered rich opportunities for English teachers to experience the graded readers-approach in three different ways to help enlarge EFL students’ vocabularies.

Keywords: Graded Readers, task, vocabulary learning, Involvement Load Hypothesis, vocabulary gain

Introduction
A great many efforts to teach the English language are devoted to the outcomes of learning vocabulary. The ability to comprehend English words is the central building block for reading, and the lack of a proficient vocabulary is regarded as
a barrier for reading comprehension (Corson, 1995; Elleman, Lindo, Morphy, & Compton, 2009). As has been shown in several studies, reading comprehension involves an interconnection of writer, reader, and context, and also requires multiple exposures to the target language rather than simply the knowledge of individual words (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 1991; Nagy & Scott, 2000; Stahl, 2003; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). In the Chinese or other Asian context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), constant exposure to the target language is often lacking. Despite this, deliberate attention to individual words receives the greatest attention in teaching English. Under such circumstances, teachers often focus on explaining the meaning of the target words in their native language, with the remainder of the vocabulary learning dependent on students’ efforts. This phenomenon often results in low vocabulary learning outcomes even after reading considerable material written in the target language.

However, we cannot deny the benefits of reading in word learning. A number of scientific investigations have directly shown that reading improves language skills such as vocabulary (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Martin-Chang & Gould, 2008; McLeod & McDade, 2011). Graded readers, written with high-frequency words and simplified language structures, are the most popular reading materials for EFL learners. The beneficial relationship between the potential of learning vocabulary and graded readers was demonstrated in Nation & Wang’s (1999) study. The coverage, density, and repetition of vocabulary in the graded readers were measured in their study and reading graded readers was shown to be an effective method to improve vocabulary.

The current study used graded readers in the investigation of three lexical tasks with different Involvement Load Indexes (ILI) based on the Involvement Load Hypothesis (Hulstijn and Laufer, 2001). It attempts to expand our existing knowledge of task-induced involvement by testing its predictive power on learning vocabulary by Chinese low-proficiency EFL learners and by assessing its impact on form recall.
Review of the Literature

Graded readers

Graded readers refer to books that are written specifically to include a high frequency of the same words and simple grammatical structures (Nation & Wang, 1999). Hill & Thomas (1988, p.44) used the term “grading scheme” to define graded readers. Graded readers provide an opportunity for EFL learners with low proficiency to read printed English materials readily.

Although certain studies have pointed out that some graded readers have poor English syntax and lack content (Cobb, 2008; Davison, 1986; Wallace, 1988), many studies have demonstrated the positive effects of using simplified materials to teach English (e.g., Bamford, 1984; Claridge, 2005; Elley, 1991; Hill & Thomas, 1988). Bamford (1984) illustrated the characteristics of graded readers and their contribution to EFL teaching. His research helped validate the grading system and readability of grader readers. Elley (1991) invited elementary school students to participate in an experiment of “book floods.” His research showed that the group of students using highly-interesting illustrated story books outperformed the group using a structured, audio-lingual program to learn the target words. This research demonstrated that tight control over syntax and vocabulary in story books leads to improved effects in learning new words incidentally. In a survey review of graded readers, Hill and Thomas (1988) stated that the graded readers are an excellent resource for learning and teaching English. In addition to this, Webb, Newton and Chang (2013) testified that learners could learn collocations from reading graded readers incidentally. Although there are still limits to graded readers, if designed appropriately, an effective reading program could bring results by making extensive use of these books (Teng, 2014a).

The Involvement Load Hypothesis (ILH)

Craik & Lockhart (1972) proposed the theory of depth and levels of processing in their research on human memory. They pointed out that a deeper level of processing leads to more detailed, meaningful, durable, and stronger memories. Hulstijn & Laufer (2001) further proposed the motivational-cognitive constructs of task-induced involvement, based on Craik & Lockhart’s (1972) theory of depth
and levels of processing. To put it succinctly, word learning and retention are dependent on the amount of effort or involvement that a task induces.

The three involvement load constructs are need, search and evaluation. The component of need is a motivational but non-cognitive dimension of involvement which is differentiated as strong need (++) and moderate need (+) based on intrinsic or extrinsic factors. A need is strong when it is self-motivated (e.g., a learner wishes to learn for what he/she lacks) and moderate when it is imposed by extrinsic factors (e.g., tasks are imposed by teachers). Search and evaluation are the two cognitive dimensions of involvement. Search indicates the process to finding the meaning of an unknown word, (e.g., finding the definition by using a dictionary or ascertaining the explanation of unknown words by asking the teacher for help). Evaluation refers to the comparison of a new word with other words and measurement of its suitability in a given context. Evaluation is strong (++) when a task requires the learners to combine new words and known words in an original context (e.g., to create a sentence or write a composition) and moderate (+) when a task only requires the learners to recognize differences between words provided in a given context (e.g., make a decision about which meaning of the new word best fits the given context).

According to the Involvement Load Hypothesis, the three components do not always appear simultaneously during a reading task. Hustijn & Laufer (2001) proposed an Involvement Load Index (ILI) to define the depth of processing, in which the absence of a component is marked 0, the moderate presence of a component is marked 1, and the strong presence of a component is marked 2. According to the ILH, tasks with higher indexes are deemed more effective for learning and retaining a word than those tasks with lower indexes.

**Empirical evidence for ILH**

Empirical support for ILH is found in several studies that compare reading tasks vs. reading supplemented with focus-on-forms activities. The findings are as follows:

In Keating’s (2008) study, word learning and retention for 79 Spanish speaking, beginning English learners were found to be dependent on a task’s involvement load. Significant differences were also found in the three tasks: Reading comprehension (task one, ILI = 1), reading comprehension supplemented with tar-
get word suppliance (task two, ILI = 2), reading comprehension plus sentence writing (task three, ILI = 3). His study revealed that passive knowledge of the target words in task three was improved by 64.3%, task two by 47%, and task one by 16.8%. Active knowledge of the target words in task three was improved by 42.1%, task two by 22.7%, and task one by 7.3%. To put it simply, tasks with higher involvement load were found to be more effective for word learning and retention than those with lower involvement load; similar results could also be found in other studies (Eckerth & Tavakoli, 2012; Hill & Laufer, 2003; Webb, 2005).

Huang, Eslami, & Willson’s (2012) study investigated the effects of output tasks on incidental vocabulary learning. They analyzed 12 studies on the Involvement Load Hypothesis, measuring five mediator variables: Design quality, types of output task, time on task, genres of text, and text-target word ratios. Five conclusions resulted: a) English learners who complete an output task bring more satisfactory results than learners who are only tasked with reading comprehension; b) tasks with higher Involvement Load Indexes (ILI) yield more vocabulary gains than tasks with lower ILIs; c) studies with better scientific research designs produced more reliable results than studies with poorer research designs; d) positive effects were related to the time on task; e) learners who read a text with a text-target word ratio of less than 2% outperformed those learners who read texts with a ratio of 2%-5%.

Laufer & Rozovski-Roitblat (2011) compared the effects of task-induced involvement and frequency of word occurrence on long-term retention of words. In their study, learners attended two tasks: reading a text with occasional Focus on Form, such as referring to a dictionary resulted in lower ILIs and reading a text followed by Focus on Forms or word-focused activities resulted in higher ILIs. Learners encountered 60 test items during a 13-week course, and were subsequently tested on their passive recall and passive recognition. Their findings revealed that, although the second task of reading plus Focus on Forms is not superior to the first task of reading plus occasional Focus on Form when the words were met 2-3 times, the second task was significantly better than the first task with 4–5 and 6–7 word encounters, both for recall and recognition. In addition, in their questionnaire, all students recommended including more output activities with a high degree of involvement. Their results was in line with Min (2008), where learners who completed a task of reading comprehension supplemented with
word-focused activities significantly outperformed in target word learning and retention than those who only had a reading of thematically related texts with no follow up activities.

**Rationale for current study**

Research on the Involvement Load Hypothesis conducted so far has mainly been focused on advanced learners, who might have a more superior ability in school-based learning. With a background of success in learning a foreign language, and they may have more motivation or investment in completing the tasks. It remains to be seen whether EFL learners in Asian contexts with a low-profi ciency level would also benefit from tasks with a high involvement load. It is quite possible that there are proficiency and lexical thresholds that learners must attain in order to fully benefit from extensive reading (Pichette, 2005) and the lexical tasks required in the research to date. Second, research conducted to date has not investigated the effect of task repetition.

**Research questions**

This study attempted to provide a more complete picture of vocabulary gains from task types through reading graded readers. The following research questions were addressed:

1) Do low-proficiency students assigned to each group have significant vocabulary growth (as measured by form recall) after taking part in the three tasks for the first time?

2) Do tasks with different ILIs lead to different gains in learning vocabulary (form recall), and does the third task, with the highest ILI, yield the greatest improvement (immediate post first-time task)?

3) Do the benefits hold when the tasks are repeated?

4) Do learners exhibit long-term retention of vocabulary (two months after the experiment), and does the third task, which has the highest ILI, yield the best results?
Method

Participants

There were 260 students who originally took part in the study. They were aged 18-21 and had no experience studying abroad. They were from a variety of majors and studied English as an elective course. They all agreed to take part in this reading experiment and to take Nation’s (1993) 1,000 word level vocabulary test before finally being admitted to the study program.

Table 1. Results of Pre-task test

<p>| | | | | | | |</p>
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</table>

There were 182 students whose scores ranged from 21-30 points and these were chosen as participants in this study. After the test, two students stated they were not satisfied with the arrangement and elected to drop out. Thus, the final number of participants was 180, with 120 males and 60 females. They were assigned randomly to three groups of 60 learners each.

Target words

Forty items were carefully selected from the graded readers used by the learners. These words were: disappear, growl, ache, frightened, pass, castle, return, notice, sound, comfortable, deeply, gloom, crash, foggy, miserable, portrait, extraordinary, reach, invent, imagination, airless, turn, measure, obey, light, realize, damage, thoughtful, tear, recognize, criminal, murder, condition, yell, tiredness, whistle, desperately, explode, adventure, complain. These words were selected based on two criteria: First, the frequency of word occurrence (measured by one of the computer programs on the Compleat Lexical Tutor website (Cobb, n.d.). Second, the target words appeared at least eight times in each book. According to previous research (Teng, 2014b; Waring & Takaki, 2003), learners tended to incidentally learn words with a frequency of at least eight.
Materials

In order to enlarge the student’s lexicons, the students had to be exposed to target words that were beyond their current lexical level. In SLA terms, that is i+1, where i represents language at the students’ current level of competence (Krashen, 1982, 1985). However, some students’ lexicons were so limited that it was very difficult to find appropriate reading materials to increase their vocabulary, as the limits of the students’ word recognition and decoding abilities had to be considered. This study scrupulously investigated the appropriateness of the materials for this reading program. The materials for the tasks were selected from the Bookworms series published by Oxford University Press. Considering the range of students’ scores from 21-30, Nation (1993) proposed that books in the third level are appropriate. Thus, four books in the third level were used in the experiment: Frankenstein, The Call of the Wild, The Secret Garden, and The Prisoner of Zenda (See Table 2).

Table 2. Text Size and Vocabulary Size of the Textbooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Frankenstein</em></td>
<td>17192</td>
<td>3044</td>
<td>647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Call of the Wild</em></td>
<td>20295</td>
<td>3526</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Secret Garden</em></td>
<td>19436</td>
<td>3341</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Prisoner of Zenda</em></td>
<td>19524</td>
<td>3289</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedures

Three tasks were used, each with different involvement load indexes (ILI). The details of the tasks and the involvement load index scores are shown in Table 3.
Table 3. Three Tasks and their ILIs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>RC</th>
<th>ILI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

RC = reading for comprehension

As is shown in the Table 3, task 3 has the highest ILI (3). These tasks were imposed by the teachers; the need was therefore moderate (+). The learners were not required to locate the meaning of unknown words by dictionary, thus search is not present in any of the three tasks. Task 1 is simply a reading task (there is no evaluation), and task 3 requires writing a composition, which requires strong motivation (++), thus has a higher ILI score than task 2 (+).

Data were collected during class hours. The study lasted for 24 weeks (see Table 4).

Table 4. Procedures Summarized
Students read one simplified book every three weeks. The classroom time allocated for each week was four hours. During that time, the students in the first group read the simplified books while the second researcher supervised the process. The students in the second group spent two hours reading the simplified books and for another two hours, their teacher read the selected texts aloud and the students followed along in their books. The students’ reading process was supervised by the second author. For the third group, the students read the books, learned the usage of target words provided by the teacher, and then wrote a composition after reading each book. Both teachers reviewed the students’ writing.

Participants finished the requirements of the three tasks in 12 weeks. With respect to task frequency, all participants conducted the same task-based study again in another 12 weeks. The vocabulary test designed to measure learners’ vocabulary growth was administered pre-tasks, 12 weeks after first-time tasks, 24 weeks after second-time tasks, and two months post-experiment. During the two months post experiment, the participants did not read the four books. The administered time of the tests was not announced to the learners so that they would not commit the target words to memory to do well on the tests. Participants also answered a questionnaire after the second half of the course (where readings and tasks were repeated).

Assessment

Vocabulary Levels Test

To measure students’ readiness to read simplified materials, Nation’s (1993) test of 1,000 words was used. The first 1,000 words are essential in reading simplified materials and were used to assign appropriate graded readers. This test consisted of 40 items. Test takers got one point for each correct item. When a student’s score is less than 10, he or she should be reading the first level of graded readers; students with scores of 10-20 are assigned the second level of graded readers; students with scores of 21-30 are assigned third level, and students with scores above 30 received level four readers (Nation, 1993, p.197). The following is an example of a test item:

We cut time into minutes, hours and days _____

(Write T if it is true, write F if it is false, write X if you don’t understand)

Newly-designed vocabulary test

A new vocabulary test was created by the authors and administered four times: before the tasks, immediately post first-time tasks and second-time tasks, as well
as two months post experiment (see Appendix I). The test was identical each time except for the order in which the test items were presented. The main purpose of this test was to evaluate the effects of task type on vocabulary growth (as measured by form recall). According to some recent studies (Eckerth & Tavakoli, 2012; Peters, 2014), form recall is the smallest dimension of lexical knowledge that could be acquired by EFL students. Hence, more research is needed for measuring form recall. Participants had to supply the target words by using the given Chinese translation and the English definition. The first letter of the English word was given to prevent learners from creating an alternative, semantically correct answer (e.g., fade instead of disappear).

Example: 消失(something that cannot be seen suddenly) d_____

A correct answer received one point, an incorrect answer zero points. Answers containing minor spelling mistakes such as ‘diappear’ (instead of ‘disappear’) were scored as incorrect. The maximum score for this vocabulary test is 40 points.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics and scores for the newly-designed vocabulary test. The test was administered at four different times: pre-study, after the first 12-week session, after the second 12-week session (same readings and tasks repeated), and two months post-study. Figure 1 presents the same results graphically.

Table 5. Scores for the Vocabulary Test Administered at Four Different Times

RC= Reading for Comprehension; RA=Reading Aloud; W=Writing Max=40
As shown in Table 5, participants’ scores on the vocabulary test revealed that they entered this reading experiment with fair vocabulary knowledge. After conducting the three tasks for the first time, the vocabulary outcomes in form recall for the three experimental groups were 31.15, 33.78, and 35.21 respectively, which demonstrated a substantial gain compared to their previous lexical knowledge. However, learners did not present an improvement after conducting the three tasks for the second time. In addition, learners showed decreased mean scores two months post experiment, as might be expected.

Table 6 summarizes responses to the questionnaire.

**Table 6. Questionnaire (n=120)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Option 1</th>
<th>Option 2</th>
<th>Option 3</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Did you have any chances to learn the unknown target words outside this classroom study?</td>
<td>Yes 0%</td>
<td>No 100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Did simply reading help you remember new words?</td>
<td>Helped me a lot 20%</td>
<td>Helped me a little 45%</td>
<td>Did not help me at all 35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Did teacher’s read aloud help you remember new words?</td>
<td>Helped me a lot 20%</td>
<td>Helped me a little 45%</td>
<td>Did not help me at all 35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Did sentence writing help you remember new words?</td>
<td>Helped me a lot 20%</td>
<td>Helped me a little 45%</td>
<td>Did not help me at all 35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Did repeated tasks help you remember new words?</td>
<td>Helped me a lot 20%</td>
<td>Helped me a little 45%</td>
<td>Did not help me at all 35%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What other methods, in your opinion, are good for learning new words?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Please only choose one)</td>
<td>1. Be more engaged in more writing activities with target words 20%</td>
<td>2. Have more post-reading exercises 45%</td>
<td>3. Read-aloud and memorize the new words 35%</td>
<td></td>
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Results showed that no participants had been exposed to the unknown target words outside the classroom (Question 1). Second, it showed the perceived value of each task, which is in line with the predictive power of each task (Question 2, 3, and 4). Third, it showed that more than a half of the participants were not willing to be engaged in repeating the tasks (Question 5). Fourth, concerning further suggestions for learning new words, students tended to prefer tasks that involved using the new words in post-reading and writing activities. Few participants perceived the value of simply memorizing new words (Question 6).

**Inferential statistics**

To understand whether each task provided a predictive power in form recall, a paired-sample $t$-test was applied in analyzing whether there was a statistically significant improvement between each administered time (See Table 7).

**Table 7.** Comparison of Group $t$-scores between Each Administration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>RC</th>
<th>RA</th>
<th>W</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admin 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin 3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*P*<0.05 RC=Reading for Comprehension; RA=Reading Aloud; W=Writing

As shown in Table 7, each group showed a statistically significant improvement after completing the tasks for the first-time (negative $t$-scores indicate the second set of scores were superior to the first set; $p$<0.05). Apparently, however, benefits from completing the tasks for a second-time were insignificant ($p$>0.05). Finally, as might be expected, all groups’ scores decreased two months later.

To probe further how the facilitative effects that each task provided differed from one another, Multivariate ANOVA was conducted. The results are presented below.

**Table 8.** Comparison of the Three Groups’ Test Scores at Different Test Time
As shown in Table 8, the F-value demonstrated that the three groups of students had almost the same pre-task levels of lexical knowledge. In addition, Multivariate ANOVA for vocabulary form recall showed main effects for task type.

To probe further which task had the most facilitative power in promoting form recall, post-hoc Tukey’s analysis was applied. Results indicated the mean scores of Task 3 and Task 2 were significantly larger than that of Task 1 (p < 0.05), and the mean score of Task 3 was significantly larger than the mean score of Task 2 (p < 0.05). This result was consistent in three administered test times (post first session, post second session, two months post study). To put it simply, the RC+W (reading plus writing task) group ranked the highest, the group with RC+RA (reading plus reading aloud task) group ranked second, and the group that simply read the graded readers ranked the lowest.

### Discussion

#### Responses to the research questions

In summary, the data revealed, in response to the four research questions, the following:

1) The students who were assigned to each group had significant vocabulary growth in learning form recall after taking part in the three tasks for the first time.

2) Tasks with differential ILIs led to differential gains in learning form recall. The third task, which had the highest ILIs, yielded the greatest improvement in learning form recall immediately post first-time task.

3) Participants did not show improved scores after taking the tasks for second time (i.e., mere repetition led to no further improvement).

4) Students in the third task showed the greatest result in retention of target words two months after the experiment (though all students in all tasks showed an overall decrease in retention).
Implications for teaching and learning

Task type was found to affect students’ vocabulary growth in form recall significantly. The general conclusion concerning the effects of task type is that all the tasks facilitated students’ proficiency in form recall, and that the facilitating power of each task was significantly different. The findings also suggested that the graded readers, which are written with a limited vocabulary, could be used as helpful reading resources for the students to improve their lexicons, especially for those learners with a vocabulary lower than 1,000 word families.

The test results also revealed that the overall power of each task was consistent with the Involvement Load Hypothesis (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001). In line with previous research (Hill & Laufer, 2003; Keating, 2008; Laufer, 2003; Webb, 2005), the R+W task, which was assigned the highest level in the motivational-cognitive constructs of task-induced involvement, best facilitated mastery of vocabulary. Tasks that differed in the construct of evaluation led to different results in learning vocabulary, which indicates that evaluation, a construct of task-induced involvement, is crucial to vocabulary learning. Based on our results, the optimal involvement in this study is moderate need, and strong evaluation. The two essential constructs of need and evaluation have different roles and effects on mastering vocabulary. Need is the precondition and guarantee to achieve the learning in a task. Evaluation, which means comparing and assessing the knowledge and use of the target words, leads to the final acquisition of target words.

The results of the current study also support the idea that word learning and retention are contingent on a focus-on-forms component. Of the three reading tasks, the task of reading plus writing activities was superior to reading only task, because word-focused activities were involved. These results were similar to those in Laufer’s (2006) study, where practicing new words in two focused word activities (higher ILIs) yielded better results than reading texts or referring to a dictionary (lower ILIs). Taken together, successful vocabulary instruction should include word-focused activities that present a high degree of involvement.

Results also revealed that mere repetition of tasks are not necessarily effective for EFL vocabulary learning. Students tended to be unwilling to be engaged in repeated tasks, which suggested that learners’ motivation is also a factor to be considered in designing and implementing tasks. This requires that the effectiveness of tasks were dependent on a high degree of task-induced involvement as well as
learners’ high engagement. In addition to this, a balanced integration of input and output (e.g., reading input plus word-focused activities as in task 3) is suggested to be of paramount importance in achieving high performance in vocabulary learning, which aligns with Nation’s (2008) four strands approach. In other words, form, input, output, and fluency should be attended to equally.

A final implication to be drawn from the present study is that deliberate rehearsal of newly learned words is necessary. In this study, even the task with the highest degree of involvement suffered a significant decrease in recalling the form after two months period, which indicates that systematic rehearsal of new words is essential for learning vocabulary. As stated in Nakata (2006), “How to distribute rehearsal opportunities affects the effectiveness and efficiency of the learning activities” (p.19). In his study, Nakata used the Low-First Method, an algorithm which was developed from cognitive psychology to realize the most optimal scheduling of rehearsal opportunities. Other studies have also clearly demonstrated the importance of rehearsal in vocabulary instruction (Folse, 2006; Keating, 2008). Armed with the above knowledge, teachers can curb unexpected declines in word retention by deliberate rehearsal of newly learned words.

**Conclusion**

The current study extends empirical support for the construct of task-induced involvement in EFL vocabulary growth by demonstrating that learners with limited vocabulary level benefit from more involved tasks. In other words, tasks with higher involvement load lead to greater gains. In addition, motivation is an important factor to consider when designing effective vocabulary learning tasks for EFL learners. Deliberate rehearsal of newly learned words is also necessary.

There are limitations in this study. The first limitation lies in the fact that the vocabulary test that was used was the same assessment tool all four times. Thus, the results may be influenced by test-retest effects.

Another limitation of this study was the fact that, although the results between task types are significantly different, statistically speaking, the differences are, in reality, somewhat small. It might be explained that the construct of search is not included in this study. The students were not required to look for the lexical meaning of the unknown target words. If the active role of search was added, it might better facilitate vocabulary outcome. In addition, if a self-imposed strong need was
added, the results might also be different. In conclusion, other possible involvement-heavy task types and combinations still need to be investigated. This means there is much room still for further research on ILH.

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References


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*Shu Zhang is a language teacher educator in Nanning University. Her research interests include reflective practice and language development.*

**Appendix 1**

Sample test items (four items out of 40)

Directions: Please write down the target words by using the given Chinese translation and the English definition. The first letter of the English word has been given.

1. 消失 (something that cannot be seen suddenly) d_____
2. 叫 (make a low noise in its throat, usually because it is angry) g____
3. 疼痛 (feel a steady, fairly strong pain) a____
4. 害怕的 (anxious or afraid) f_____
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 Chapter 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:
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.

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<th>Word Types = 2,336</th>
<th>Lit. Theory Vocab = 40</th>
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<td>Word Tokens = 19,335</td>
<td>Course Vocab Tokens = 860</td>
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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.

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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.

References


**About the Author**

*Neil Addison was born in the U.K and is Associate Professor in the Department of Literature and Culture in English at Tokyo Woman’s Christian University. He is interested in employing both authentic literature and graded readers in English language teaching to improve students’ reading skills and critical thinking abilities.*

**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?
While working as an assistant English teacher in Japan for several years, I had the opportunity to work with many teachers, many students, and in many schools. Typically, students were more comfortable with print-based textbook exercises than with speaking and listening. Although we planned speaking activities based on our textbook lessons every week, students had difficulty seeing the value or wanting to participate in them. It was discouraging to expend so much effort in planning for so little return in participation. Finally, my colleagues and I realized that the English speaking contexts portrayed in our textbooks were too foreign or remote for our students to understand and that each lesson presented a new, but equally foreign, context. We decided to try creating a more familiar local context for speaking that could be sustained over several lessons, making it easier, (we hoped), for students to participate. Our initial experiment met with modest success. We were able to reinforce target language points, build better connections from one lesson to the next, and engage students in more speaking than was previously possible. The process described below may help other teachers create a classroom context that encourages students to speak more English, too.

**Initial Planning**

The most important step is making a decision about the role play context. We looked ahead in our course textbook and noticed that the next lesson focused on making requests for food in a restaurant. Going to a restaurant is an occasional activity for our students, but typically adults are the ones making requests or purchases. We wanted a setting that young people could relate to. Perhaps because the textbook lesson focused on food, we thought of the convenience store. Convenience stores are everywhere in Japan (and many other places as well these
Everyone purchases snacks, beverages, magazines, school supplies, and personal items at their nearby convenience store, including international residents and visitors in Japan who are often English speakers. Thus, the convenience store is a familiar, local setting for our middle and high school students and one where they might observe or eavesdrop on real people really speaking English. Thus, we decided to use the convenience store as our role play context for several English lessons. In other locales or with adult learners, teachers might select a local tourist site, a multinational corporation, an international airport, or a professional conference as the role play context. The only requirements are that it be familiar to the students and rich with activity so that it can be used for multiple English lessons.

**Suggestions for Implementation**

1. Expect some confusion at first. It always takes a while to teach a new game or begin a new project, but once the context is firmly established, more time will be available for English practice and less needed for classroom management.

2. Establish a routine. For example, on a day when the textbook lesson includes a new dialog or speaking activity, show the students how to adapt, personalize, localize, and extend it for use in your role play context. Form groups and identify roles in preparation for the next lesson. The next day, preserve a few minutes for the role play. On subsequent role play days, make sure students review their previous role plays as well as try out the new one. Each role play day should create opportunity for review as well as new practice.

3. Begin with stable student groups. In the early phase of establishing a sustained role play context, class time will be used more efficiently, and students will feel more comfortable if they are working with the same peer group. As the routine and context grow familiar and as students build experience, they will be able to adjust better to new groups, partners, and roles.

4. Give students some autonomy. For example, our students chose the names for their convenience stores, listed (a minimum of 30) items available in their stores, and created their own pricelists.

5. Enlist student help in enriching the role play environment. For our convenience store context, students can bring in empty snack food packages and beverage containers or just the labels, if storage space is limited. Other forms of realia may include pictures, calendars, used clothing, props, and student-made materials. Being able to move, handle materials, and set the “stage” for role play helps students mentally relax, re-energize, and get into their roles.
6. Gradually increase the amount of interaction and complexity of the task. For example, with our convenience store role play, we asked students to try to “save money” (by comparing prices at different “stores”) and to “purchase” no more than two items from each store. These guidelines increased the number of interactions which, for language learners, means more practice, more review, more confidence, and growing fluency. The guidelines also added to the authenticity of the role play.

7. Explore opportunities for the bigger stage. While I have not yet tried these ideas, I see how sustained role play could grow into full-scale simulation or even a dramatic production. For example, teachers might ask for groups of student volunteers to demonstrate their role play skills at a local English camp, for a visiting international delegation, or during an annual school festival.

Closing

Despite its global reach, English is often perceived as “just” a required subject of study for many middle and high school students and their teachers in EFL contexts. By creating a familiar, locally relevant classroom context for English use, teachers may be able to help their students understand, enjoy, and speak English more. When this happens, students’ overall perception of English, not to mention proficiency in it, can improve as well.

About the Author

Robert Primeau was an assistant language teacher in Japan with the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme for four years. His interests include language development in young children, the interplay between language and culture, and students’ perceptions of English study. He holds a bachelor’s degree in arts and political science from Concordia University in Montreal, Canada and is currently pursuing the MA in TESOL at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies.
I have been teaching private English lessons to young learners for nearly 20 years. Many of them enjoy the grown-up feeling of going to school and having homework. They willingly review their lessons at home by rereading their textbook and listening to their audio CD. However, classes are just once a week and finding opportunities to speak English between them is understandably difficult because the adults in their lives seldom speak English. By tapping into children’s natural affinity for imagination and role play, however, I have found a way to create conversation partners for my young English language learners.

Scott and Ytreberg (1990) describe the use of an English-speaking classroom mascot who can help teachers and inspire students to speak English. Mascots help teachers model dialogs and teach songs. They ask questions that students may not be able to ask themselves. They comfort children and help them role play just as their favorite stuffed animals do. Finally, they are good listeners; some children are more comfortable talking to the mascot than to the teacher. Inspired by Scott and Ytreberg, I help my students create their own English-speaking puppets. Their puppets become their friends. They travel with them from home to school and back again and comfort them when they are down. Best of all, their puppets listen when the children want to sing, talk, or play in English.

**Procedure**

These steps may be helpful for other teachers who wish to introduce the use of conversation puppets in their English classes with young learners. They may be completed over several days, depending on the length and size of class or the age range of your students.

1. Set aside a box or basket to collect leftover, dated, cheap, or discarded (but clean) items that can be used to create a hand-held puppet. Especially useful are paper bags or fans, socks, gloves, mittens, kitchen utensils with handles, paper or plastic cups, scraps of fabric, and yarn. You will also need fabric glue.
2. When a new class begins, introduce your friend, the class mascot. Use your mascot to model the activities that you hope the children will do with their puppets later, for example, reading, singing, and having a conversation with them.

3. After students are comfortable with the class routine and speaking with your mascot, ask them if they would like to have a special friend of their own who could go home with them, someone who understands and speaks English, just as your mascot does.

4. Bring out the materials and let the children create their puppets. You will probably find that making the puppets is a great ice-breaker and serves to build positive group dynamics. Older children will help younger ones, and as they work, they will enjoy playfully talking to their new friends.

5. While they are working, tell the students to think of names for their puppet friends.

6. When they are finished (perhaps in the next lesson), ask everyone to introduce their new friend to the class. Then, tell a silly story or review a familiar song so that it is easy for the children and their puppets to respond or join in.

7. Tell the children to keep their puppet friends safe, introduce them to their families, and remind them that their puppets understand and speak English.

8. Include the puppets in future dialogs, story, and sing-a-long sessions.

9. Before class ends each week, give the children a “homework” task that specifically involves reading to or talking with their puppet at home. Model for them using the class mascot. For example:
   - Sing one of our songs with your puppet every day.
   - Tell your friend what you ate for dinner every day this week.
   - Show your puppet the calendar every morning. Tell him or her what day it is.
   - Use the calendar and count with your puppet 1, 2, 3 to today’s date.

10. Incorporate discussion of the puppets into your welcome, roll call, and warm-up routines each week, asking, for example,
   - What did your friend do this week?
   - Do we have a puppet with something to show or tell?

11. When new children join the class, give them a chance to create their puppets, too.

12. Encourage students to have their puppets interact with each other during class time, both informally and in simple puppet shows.
Conclusion

Imagination games, role play, and talking with toys, stuffed animals, or puppets are universal, developmentally appropriate experiences for young children. Creative language teachers can capitalize on those childhood activities to create an authentic-like environment for language practice from the child’s perspective.

Reference


About the Author

Yoko Takano owns her own English language school where she teaches students from kindergarten through high school. She is a globetrotting traveler and a candidate for the MA in TESOL at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies.
English has been an official language in Hong Kong since the colonial period and enjoys prestige in government, commerce, media, and education. Nevertheless, many students at the secondary and tertiary levels in Hong Kong still perceive English as little more than a compulsory subject of study. Teachers often describe students as passive, demotivated, and unable (or unwilling) to participate in interactive classroom activities. Of course, teachers in Hong Kong are not alone in this situation. In recent years, increasing the use of classroom technology has often been suggested as a means of making English lessons more relevant and engaging. A growing body of literature is available to advise and assist teachers in planning technology-enhanced lessons in which students view online videos, post and read comments on discussion forums, and collaborate on wiki assignments, for example.

Unfortunately, technology-based lessons cannot guarantee that students enjoy their English classes any more than new textbooks can. If the content of the lesson seems irrelevant to their lives, students are unlikely to derive maximum benefit from it. Thus, another way to use technology in the English class is to make it the subject, rather than (or in addition to) being the medium of instruction. English teachers can create opportunities for students to show, tell, share, teach, and engage with each other about their real world use of technology even in classrooms where technology is limited, dated, or non-existent.

**Getting Started**

To introduce technology as a topic for discussion or inquiry in a language class, consider one or both of the following:

- Use a lesson or chapter on the topic of technology from an accessible ESL or EFL textbook to introduce the topic, key vocabulary, and useful expressions. Today, technology is as common a topic in multi-skills textbooks as family, occupations, and leisure time are.
- Write these broad categories across your classroom board, spacing them out from left to right: recreation and entertainment, communication, social
media, buying and selling, news and views. Invite students to come to the board and list under each category the names of websites, programs, or applications (apps) that they use for these purposes. For example, under social media, they might list Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Line, and others. These lists can help begin a conversation about the forms of technology and the devices students routinely use. They can also serve to show the depth and breadth of student experience with technology and suggest how teachers might capitalize on this knowledge and experience in class.

**Learning with and about Technology**

The following tips describe ways to deliver English content using technology, supplement English lessons with technology, or build English lessons around the topic of technology in program-initiated, teacher-initiated, and student-initiated variations.

**Using video**

Videos, now frequently in the form of DVDs, have been used in language classes for some time, primarily to provide listening input and models of oral or conversational discourse. Today, many textbook series come with quality, engaging, authentic-like DVDs. If programs can afford the hardware and software for viewing them in class or in a self-access center, video recordings also provide important access to various dialects of English, relieving non-native-speaking teachers from being the sole model of English for their students. If textbook-related videos or DVDs are not available, teachers can turn to online video archives such as ESLvideo.com, YouTube, and TED.com for videos ranging from mini lectures on form-focused points of English for language learners to authentic content meant to inform or entertain English speakers on a wide array of subjects. Finally, in classes that lack connectivity or where teachers are unfamiliar with online resources, student-centered lessons can still bring the world of movies and videos into class with “homework” assignments such as these:

- What is your favorite movie? Why? Can you tell us the story briefly? Can you find a trailer of the movie online to show us? (If so, have the student play it with no sound and narrate it in his/her own words.)
- Do you share funny videos with friends through social media? If so, come tomorrow prepared to show your classmate a video that you have enjoyed recently.
• Have you ever learned to do something by watching an online video demonstration? If so, can you show us?

Using a learning management system

Well-funded or centrally-managed programs nowadays often make comprehensive learning systems available to their faculty. They range from free platforms such as Moodle to sophisticated commercial learning management systems (LMS). All such systems have multiple functions designed to foster student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction outside the classroom as well as in. Examples include:

• Discussion forums where students post and comment on topics assigned by the teacher or proposed by themselves.
• Blogs or web logs which function much like paper-based journals or logs but with a wider, more-public readership.
• Wikis—web applications that allow collaborative work on a document or project in a virtual environment.

For the web-savvy teacher without institutional support, free, customizable web-based tools are available for creating one’s own websites and blogs, and with each passing year, these tools become easier to use. Finally, many young students are already engaged with online communication and collaboration in social media, gaming communities, and club, hobby, or professional circles. Teachers may be surprised to learn that their seemingly passive English students manage an English language website or blog. When school or classroom technology is limited, these out-of-class experiences can still be used as English class content.

Using mobile devices

Mobile devices such as smart phones, electronic notebooks, tablets, and iPads are becoming more affordable and more available almost daily it seems. Users are not limited by access to fixed computers; they have access 24/7. The possibilities for in-class use of mobile devices for engagement, learning, and collaboration are nearly limitless. One way to break the ice with this topic is to first ask students to keep a detailed log of their mobile phone use for just one day. What sites did they visit? Did they call, text, or take pictures of friends? Did they listen to music, play games, read the news, or check on social media contacts? Did they schedule meetings, get directions, read (or write) a restaurant review, or check the arrival time for their bus or train? No matter what language they use for these interactions, they can
describe, compare, and evaluate them using English. Imagine a series of pair or triad warm-up activities built around routine use of mobile devices, for example:

- What app or website is most useful to you as an English student?
- Copy one of your recent text messages (from any language) on the board, and then “translate” it into full and standard English.
- What is your most useful app? Why? Can you show me how to use it?
- What mobile phone plan do you have? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
- How do you try to protect your data in a digital world?
- What is your opinion on these statements: Mobile devices foster or hinder communication?

Conclusion

The activities described here show that technology can be a valuable presence in English language lessons even in remote or developing regions where budgets are limited, Internet service is spotty, and teachers are intimidated by, or unfamiliar with, classroom applications of technology. Whether teachers use technology as a tool or subject of instruction will vary with local conditions and program needs, but either way, it has the potential to engage students and help them make connections between their required study of English and their real world interests and goals.

About the Author

Chi Cheung Ruby Yang is a teaching fellow at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Institute of Education. She completed her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics at Lancaster University and obtained her B.Ed., M.Ed., and M.A. in Applied Linguistics at The University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include second language teaching and learning and issues of gender and language.
**English for Academic Research: Writing Exercises**

**Review by Is’haaq Akbarian**
University of Qom, Qom, Iran


The atmosphere of academic life is usually dominated by a ‘publish or perish’ system in which the employment, promotion, and tenure of university lecturers as well as the achievements of graduate students and other researchers alike are judged upon their publications. The chances for publication of one’s research in prestigious international journals are determined by two major factors: the quality of research conducted and the quality of English used in reporting the findings (e.g., Perry, 2005). This presents problems for academic writers, especially those writing in a second language, and Wallwork’s book is targeting these writers in particular. Consumers of research want clear and quick access to information. For this reason, academic researchers must learn to write with clarity and precision.

Wallwork intends to produce a series of clear, easy-to-use, practical books on the different aspects of the world of academic work for the non-native speakers of English, ranging from minute points concerning grammar, usage, style of academic English, and vocabulary, to the tips and tricks used in academic correspondence, conference presentations, and research papers/manuscripts.

*English for Academic Research: Writing Exercises* is intended for non-English-speaking graduate and doctoral students, and researchers. This book can be used in conjunction with English for Writing Research Papers. The volume introduces and illustrates all the writing skills that will contribute to improving research manuscripts and enhancing the likelihood of their acceptance. Wallwork agrees that “if a paper is not readable, it cannot be published” (p. vii).

This book consists of ten chapters or sections. Each section conforms to the following distinctive structure. It starts with a tabular abstract, i.e., a topic list of the writing skills in that section that are cross-referenced to two of Wallwork’s other books in the series: *English for writing research papers and English for re-
search: Usage, style, and grammar. Underlying theoretical issues for the skills are sometimes given under them. Next, instructions to exercises related to each skill are given in *italics*, followed by examples shaded in grey. The exercises have possible answers or keys underneath that will also serve self-study in cases where examples are not provided. Exercises move from individual to holistic. That is, each exercise unit is concerned with one individual item but several points are simultaneously practiced in some exercise units. The exercises are actual examples of errors encountered by the author in editing manuscripts.

Section 1 “Punctuation and Spelling” exemplifies the problems non-natives encounter with using commas, semicolons, brackets, hyphens, capitalization, and so on. Section 2 “Word Order Practices”, asks readers to rewrite sentences, using the most typical English word order that best helps readers assimilate information easily and quickly.

Introducing sentence types, Section 3, is concerned with exercises on dividing up long sentences and paragraphs into shorter and more manageable ones. There are also exercises on putting the sentences and paragraphs into logical order. Section 4 “Link Words: Connecting Phrases and Sentences Together” walks the reader through connecting ideas, such as logical progression, use of link words, making evaluations or contrasts, repetition, etc., to facilitate the understanding of the text.

Research-oriented writing should be concise. Therefore, Section 5 “Being Concise and Removing Redundancy” shows how to revise the writing to be concise. Manuscript writers are thus suggested to delete redundant words, link words, phrases, and sentences, or to replace a phrase with a word, with no other changes.

In English, words are not related to one another in terms of gender or case. Consequently, ambiguity might arise in understanding what words refer to. To disambiguate the reading and facilitate understanding, Section 6 “Ambiguity and Political Correctness” practices repetition of key words, the use of –ing form, sentence modification, and gender-neutral sentences.

It is crucial that non-native speakers acquire paraphrasing to avoid plagiarism and identical repetition of their own statements later in the paper. Hence, Section 7 “Paraphrasing and Avoiding Plagiarism” works on generic words or phrases, and statistics, acceptable to use without having to use quotation marks.
Section 8 “Defining, Comparing, Evaluating, and Highlighting” illustrates how an author should differentiate and/or compare his/her findings with that of other researchers, and thus highlight the findings. As a result, it proposes exercises on defining, confirming evidence of researchers, showing the importance of the findings, comparing research elements like Methodology, Results, etc., and evaluating.

Section 9 “Anticipating Possible Objections, Indicating Level of Certainty, Discussing Limitations, Hedging, Future Work” puts forward exercises on how to support one’s view against another view in the literature, how to indicate certainty level, how to discuss limitations, how to tone down the strength of statements, and where to hedge. These and other such exercises are discussed in the context of the different sections of a research paper, e.g., Results, Discussion, and so on.

The book concludes with Section 10 “Writing Each Section of a Paper” wherein Wallwork provides practice on the structure of a research paper. This is done by giving general guidelines, patterns, or specific instructions on how to organize and improve the different sections of a paper – from the Abstracts to the Acknowledgments. Unlike the other sections, fewer exercises and answer keys are given in this section. In fact, the skills worked on in Section 1–9 are brought together here.

Within 10 practical sections, Wallwork briefly touches upon important and basic pieces of knowledge and experience on how to improve one’s manuscript for publication purposes. The volume avoids unnecessary jargon and redundancy and contains a sufficient number of exercises, which are authentic and have not been produced commercially. Consequently, the exercises are more tangible.

Notwithstanding the above positive points, the volume contains some shortcomings that might be improved in future imprints to serve the readers well. For one thing, the design of such a book could be made much more user-friendly; the font used is not eye-friendly and the structure of the items contained is a bit routine. In addition, the volume is in need of a thorough and careful proofreading and editing since it contains a number of mistakes, especially given that the book is intended as a guide for non-native speakers. At times, there are incorrect answers in the keys. Repetitious exercises need to be removed or modified.

Next, Keywords reveal the focus of a study, and help organize searches of online material. Exercises on what proper words to include as Keywords would have
added to the book’s usefulness. Another possible area of coverage (for future editions) is the construction of research questions. These must communicate clearly the main focus of the study and should be worded carefully.

Yet, the few points raised above do not at all devalue its worth. In fact, *English for Academic Research: Writing Exercises* teaches numerous points in a self-study manner that makes it a very useful addition to the toolkit of anyone with a good command of English and a keen interest to publish his/her research in a professional journal.

**References**


**About the Reviewer**

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Language Learning Beyond the Classroom

Review by Cameron Romney
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As part of the ESL & applied linguistics professional series by Routledge, this book is intended for teacher training and/or graduate programs, but there is much of interest for in-service teachers as well. The book is a collection of 29 edited chapters by 39 different authors on the topic of language learning outside of the traditional classroom based on the authors’ experiences—primarily in both EFL and ESL situations—but also with non-English language learning contexts.

These chapters are arranged in five sections: involving the learner outside of the classroom, using technology and the Internet, learning through television, out-of-class projects, and interacting with native speakers. All chapters in the book are approximately 10 pages long and organized with the same five subsections: introduction and overview, vignette, principles, applications, payoffs and pitfalls. Additionally there are discussion questions, resource lists, and references for each chapter.

The chapters are largely written in an accessible style and because of the standardized organization, readers need not read the book chapter by chapter, but can refer to individual chapters on topics of interest, more like a reference book. The inclusion of a summary at the beginning of each chapter gives readers an overview of what is discussed, enabling them to quickly and easily decide which chapters might be applicable to their students and situation.

Some teachers might question the need for a volume like this, as they may consider classrooms the natural place for language learning to occur and non-classroom environments to be unsympathetic places where language learning is difficult (Benson & Reinders, 2011). Paradoxically, however, many teachers believe that without the opportunity to use language for authentic communicative purposes, learning can rarely progress beyond passive, receptive skills. Opportunities for au-
authentic communication abound outside of the classroom, making them, “an im-
portant compliment to classroom-based learning” (Benson & Reinders, 2011, p. xii). Indeed, an important role of any learner-centered teacher should be to prepare
students for individualized, autonomous, interactive learning (Brown, 2007), which
should include learning outside of the classroom.

The greatest strength of this volume is that the chapters are a collection of
personal experiences of the authors and their students, and while many are research
informed, they are not research. This is a strength because it allows for a very ac-
cessible reading style, often in the form of highly engaging narrative, that tells the
successes, and occasional failures, of language learning outside of the classroom.
It is easy for teachers to see how these opportunities might be implemented with
his or her students.

However, it is a weakness because often the purposes for the activities are
presented as common knowledge type assumptions without adequate substantia-
tion, either in the form of references to research, or examples from the author’s
experience. Furthermore, the learning outcomes are sometimes vague and/or gen-
eral phenomena like an increase in vocabulary, or gains in student confidence, of-
fered without adequate substantiation. The chapters relate what the learners did,
but not always what they learned. It should be noted that this criticism does not
apply equally to every chapter, as some chapters are better substantiated than oth-
ers. Ultimately, it will be up to the reader to determine how accurate the assump-
tions are and therefore how appropriate each of the various activities presented are
for his or her students.

Despite this weakness, this volume is highly recommended for teachers look-
ing for new ways to help their students use the target language outside of class,
even if for nothing more than to find more interesting, more creative and distinctive
homework assignments, let alone self-directed, autonomous learning. It is also rec-
ommended for those teachers who are language learners themselves, as it offers
several teacher-as-learner examples.

References

Beyond the language classroom, (pp. 1-6). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

**About the Reviewer**

*Cameron Romney has taught ESL/EFL in both the United States and Japan for the last 17 years. He holds an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Colorado at Denver. In 2015 he was employed as a Foreign Language Lecturer at Kyoto Sangyo University in Kyoto, Japan.*
Notes to Contributors

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