
From the Chalkface

Get Your Students to Read More

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Summary: Since Japanese students are unaccustomed to reading English books for pleasure, it is understandable that they are reluctant to try. I have found that using easy graded readers and giving extrinsic rewards helps the students get past this initial hurdle. Setting high but attainable goals for my students, not asking for book reports or other lengthy reports, giving points and bonus points for books read and letting the students decide what books, where, when, and what level they'll read helps open the students' mind toward reading in English.

Students: I use this technique with university students of all levels mostly in my speaking and writing classes, but it can be used in any class.

Materials: Graded readers at the appropriate level, at least 2-3 books available per student and as many titles as possible. The more titles there are the more choices the students have. In this specific case, a minimum of at least 20 different titles is required.

Time required: One entire period to properly initiate the students to the graded readers and determine their level, then between 5 and 10 minutes per class period thereafter.

Rationale: Motivation is the force that pushes people to achieve. When intrinsic motivation is a bit low, extrinsic rewards (as in a 10% bonus) come to the rescue.

In my speaking and writing classes, I require my students to read 10 graded readers during the semester which counts toward 10% of

their final grade. I set that goal instead of letting the students decide how many books they'll read because I believe the more you read, the better you get at it. Very often in the beginning, students encounter books they thought they'd enjoy but don't, and if that happens more than once, they are likely to give up reading altogether. On the other hand, by being required to read 10, quitting after 2-3 books is not an option which also means that they will surely encounter at least a few books they really enjoy and also learn to make better choices in the future.

This method so far has proven quite effective and very few students elect to read fewer than the 10 required. On the other hand, usually 4-5 students per class will continue reading after they have read the 10 required. This is what prompted me to add a reading bonus to encourage students to read even more. The bonus consists of an extra 10% available at the rate of 1% per book for books 11 through 20 as long as they have completed all the class' other requirements. Yes, it is bribery, but it's very fruitful as students read more books, faster, right from the start.

To make the experience easier, every class period, I bring the books to the classroom in a cart. I offer a wide variety of titles and genres and always bring a few levels so the students can choose what they want to read and at what level they want to read. If what I offer them is too easy, they only need to tell me and the next class I will add more titles from the next level up.

Procedure

First Class: In the first period the readers are used, explanations are given to the students such as: why we are using the graded readers, how they will be used in my class (for pleasure not for homework or tests), the proper way to choose a book at the correct level, how to borrow the books and return them, how to fill out the library cards at

the back of the book, etc...

To help the students choose a book that is at the correct level for them, I bring as many books as possible from 3-4 different levels to the class and tell the students to choose a book from the lowest level and read it in class. For really advanced groups, I might start them at the second or third level from the bottom instead of the lowest one. When they're finished, I tell them that if they feel the book was too easy for them, they can choose one from the next level up, read it, choose one from the next level up if that one was too easy, and so on. If they feel comfortable with books at the lowest level, there is absolutely no shame in it. It is important that the students choose the level themselves as they are the only ones who know what feels comfortable for them. It is very important to remind the students that this kind of reading is for fluency rather than for vocabulary building, thus the books read should be numerous, easy and enjoyable. Students tend to choose books that are too difficult for them, out of habit, so these fundamental rules might help guide them in this new kind of reading:

- The books should be easy. No dictionaries are to be used, and there should be no more than 2 unknown words per page. If there are more, it means the book is too difficult.
- If the students don't like a book, they should immediately stop reading it and return it for another one as soon as possible.

Only during the first class will the students read books in the classroom in order to determine their level.

Regular Classes: For the first 5-10 minutes of each class period, the students have time to return the books they have finished reading and choose a new book. The reading is done on the student's own time at the student's own pace.

For each book the students read, they have to complete 2 easy tasks, the second of which is used for assessment. The first one is to fill-out a rating sheet which is attached inside the front cover of the book.

On that rating sheet, they give the book 1-5 stars, write their opinion of the book (usually 1 word), and write their name. This part is helpful to students who are thinking of borrowing the book.

The second task is to fill-out 1 line on a book report summary. That summary is mostly for research purposes and the last question is to check whether they have really read the book. Questions on the form are: title, book level, how difficult/easy they felt the book was, and to write 1 sentence about their favorite part of the book. It is purposely quite short so as to not demotivate the students.

Assessment: Reading 10 graded readers and filling-out the summary report counts for 10% of the students' final grade and there is a 10% bonus for books 11-20 as long as all other class requirements have been met.

Reflection: Since I introduced the 10% bonus, students are very eager to start reading and they keep reading at a faster pace than they had previously. This is the first semester with a bonus, but I can already see a positive difference. My hope is to get the students to read enough books during the semester to make them realize reading in English can be fun, to get them hooked on reading and to have them go to the main library building and continue borrowing graded readers after the semester is over. On a positive note, the main library reported to us that last semester, out of all the books in the library, 22 of the 27 titles borrowed the most often were graded readers.

Variations: Many activities can be done using the graded readers: reading circles, reports, discussions, however, I want my students to read without having to do anything except enjoy the story. The number of required readings can be increased. I have required my intermediate classes to read 20 mandatory books plus 20 bonus books and still had incredibly good results. Feel free to experiment with your class according to their level. Just keep the number of readings reasonable.