Using Moodle Forum discussions to motivate extensive reading

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Abstract

One of the ultimate goals of our extensive reading (ER) program is to have our students become autonomous learners. In order to improve student motivation, we have started to use the Forum plugin in Moodle to ask at least one new question every week in two CALL classes on the Honjo campus. This forum-based communication provided the opportunity for ER feedback for both teachers and students. Some of the questions we asked included: "Do you like ER or hate it?" "Do you remember the definition of extensive reading?" "How do you choose books?" Students voluntarily answered the questions and their answers were often contrary to our expectations. One such example was their preference for one brand of extensive reading books over another. The majority of the students in one class liked the Penguin Readers over the Oxford Bookworms, but the majority of students in the other class preferred Oxford Bookworms. Even though there would seem to be little clue as to why this phenomenon occurred, we will make some educated guesses in this paper. During the course of the semester we achieved our goal for this project, and by eliciting feedback from our students we made them aware of various meta-aspects of the extensive reading program and thus increased their motivation.

Keywords: extensive reading, Moodle, Forum plugin

What is extensive reading (ER)? Most students usually don't even know the basic definition of ER, so we explain it at the beginning of the semester every year. According to the Extensive Reading Foundation's *Guidebook to Extensive Reading*, ER is a reading activity in which people "read quickly and enjoyably with adequate comprehension". This definition seems very easy to understand, but the problem our students have is that they cannot form the habit of reading without constant encouragement.

In order to address this problem we decided to use the Forum plugin in Moodle, one of the most successful CMSs (Course Management System) in the world. Since it is open source software; many plugins have been created for it. The Forum plugin is one that allows teachers to post messages and questions and the students can then write their own opinions and answers, not only to the teacher's original post, but also to the responses of their peers. During the first semester of 2014, we used this plugin to interact with our students on a weekly basis. This forum-based means of communication provided effective ER feedback for both teachers and students as well as an abundance of data.

Methodology

Participants

Two first semester CALL classes at the APU Honjyo campus voluntarily participated in this research. Even though each class had about sixty students, the number of answers varied according to attendance.

Research Design

Every week we asked new questions using Moodle and our students answered willingly. Rather than gathering objective evidence, we limited this project to the subjective boundary of purely educational processes. We aimed to elicit thought-provoking answers so that we could challenge our student's intelligence and increase their motivation. The serendipitous consequences of our research seemed to stimulate our students.

Procedure

We utilized the built-in Forum plugin in our Moodle Virtual Learning Environment. The Forum plugin allowed us to initiate specific discussion sessions, and our students answered the questions during class time. The teachers' questions and the students' answers were automatically displayed in several different formats. For example, Moodle allows you to display the newest message first; the oldest message first,or all of the messages in a threaded or nested form. We manually recorded the data, as the students' original answers were all written as full sentences.

Results

In the following analysis, we will make comparisons between two different classes, henceforth referred to as Class A and Class B in the interest of privacy.

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Question

Do you think you will continue reading graded readers extensively after this class is finished? Why do you think so?

Summary of the answers

In Class A, 63% of the students answered that they would continue reading, with 30% answering that they would not. It was a huge victory for those who planned to continue reading. In Class B, 79% answered that they would continue, 7% answered that they might continue, and 14% answered they would not. In both classes, the majority of the students showed a positive attitude toward extensive reading.

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Question

Do you like extensive reading or do you hate it?

Summary of the answers

In Class A, 36% answered that they liked extensive reading, 53% answered that they hated it, and 10% abstained. Thus the student consensus sided with those who hate extensive reading. In Class B, 93 % answered that they liked it and 7% answered that they felt neutral towards the practice. In Class B, students who loved extensive reading were in the overwhelming majority. In Class A, the majority (53%) hated extensive reading while the majority (93%) liked extensive reading in Class B. But the reason for this discrepancy is unknown. It obviously depended upon some unknown variable such as academic major or class gender make-up. Whatever the ultimate cause, the results imply that the majority of students in the Class A don't have the same level of intrinsic motivation that Class B has.

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Question

Which books do you prefer to read, Longman Penguin Readers or Oxford Bookworms?

Summary of the answers

In the Class A, 86% answered that they liked Oxford and 14% answered that they liked Penguin. In the Class B, 52 % answered that they liked Penguin, 31% answered that they liked Oxford, and the rest answered they liked books from other publishers. Faced with completely opposite results made us ask the question why? To answer this riddle, we needed to understand how students chose their books.

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Question

What genre do you like to read? Realistic novels, SF, mystery, thriller, romance, history, non-fiction, ethnic story, fantasy, poetry, legend, biography, adventure, short stories, humor, or other (please specify the genre).

Summary of the answers

In the Class A, a surprising number preferred mysteries.

Mystery	35%
SF	17.5%
Fantasy	11%
Adventure	5%
Non-fiction	5%
Biography	3%
Thriller	3%
Realistic	3%
Romance	3%
Short stories	2%
Novelized movie	2%

Class B also liked mysteries best, but the same number also liked non-fiction. Science Fiction was much lower on Class B's list, but it was the second most favorite genre for Class A.

Mystery	20%
Non-fiction	20%
Action	19%
Disney fairy tale	17%
Romance	7%
SF	7%
Horror	3%
Thriller	3%
Comedy	1%
Historical	1%

This preference for different genres and their relative availability could explain why one class preferred Oxford graded readers over the ones published by Penguin.

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Question

What was the greatest obstacle that prevented you from reading?e.g. too busy, nothing to read that interests me, no one to talk to about GR reading, nothing stands in my way, other (please specify)

Summary of the answers

In Class A, the majority reported that they didn't have the reading skills or vocabulary. The second biggest obstacle was sleepiness. The third biggest obstacle was being too busy.

[awareness of being bad at in English, lack of reading skills, lack of vocabulary]	36%
[sleepiness, fatigue, lack of fitness, worldly desires]	31%
[busy, can't concentrate]	24%
[can't find interesting books]	10%

In Class B, the majority reported that they didn't have time to study English. The second biggest obstacle was their lack of English skills. The third obstacle was their failure to find sufficiently interesting books.

[busy, can't concentrate]   50%
[awareness of being bad at in English, lack of
reading skills, lack of vocabulary]   37%
[can't find interesting books]   7%
[They hate English.]   2%
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The questions above were given to both classes, so the results could be compared. But we also gave questions to each class separately, in which case no class comparisons are available.

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Question

While you are reading, do you have the "feeling of being forced"? Why do you feel so?

Summary of the answers

The percentage of people who have "feelings of being forced" in extensive reading is 41.3% while 54.3% do not have them.
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Question

Which do you like best, plot-driven novels or character-driven novels?

Summary of the answers

Plot-driven stories were overwhelmingly preferred - 73.3%, while 26.3% answered that they preferred character-driven novels.

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Question

In order to find the number of words you read, what method do you use? (Example: To look at the webpage of Toyota-kosen, to read the English Extensive Reading Book Guide etc.)

Summary of the answers

The majority answered that they were using the Toyota-kosen website and the back-cover of the book. This question partly solves the question we had when we compared the two classes and discovered that Class A liked Oxford better and Class B preferred Penguin. The majority of the students choose their books by the cover, so they are emotionally attracted by the physical aspects of the books. As we can see in the next question and its results, they also showed that they would choose a series of the books from the library. In fact, they often kept reading other books from the same series.

Toyota-kosen website   32%
Back-cover   32%
The Internet   18%
GR Guidebook   11%
I count!   4%
I don't count   4%
By instinct   2%

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Question

When you choose a GR book, do you choose the book based on your interest (that is, if you found what you want to know in the title, back-cover of the book, you are based on your interest)?

Seemingly the answers show that the students were not choosing the books based on their contents, but instead students were choosing books based on the visual and textual information encoded on the front and back covers.

By the cover   37%
By the title   27%
Interested in the content   17%
No reason   8%
Level of the book   5%
After briefly read it   3%
I dare to choose randomly   2%

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Question

What is the reason that you check out a

particular GR book from the library?

1．Because our teacher recommended
2．Because librarian recommended (They said, "It's interesting" or they posted some information of recommending books somewhere.)
3．Because I had read the book written by the same author
4．Because I had read the book of the same genre
5．Because my friend(s) said that it's interesting
6．Prize-winning book
7．The one I randomly choose from the bookshelf of the library
8．Other (Please specify.)

Summary of the answers

Surprisingly, the majority of students were just checking out the books at random. An interesting finding was the fact that some students were using an ER website to help choose books.

The one I randomly choose from the bookshelf of the library 71%
Because I had read the book of the same genre 13%
Because my friend(s) said that it's interesting 8%
Because our teacher recommended 3%
Other (because they saw Toyota-kosen website) 3%
Because it's a Prize-winning book 2%

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Question

How do you feel about the amount of reading you did this year?

Summary of the answers

Majority of them said that they read fewer books than they were planning to read.

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Question

What was the most memorable book you read during this semester?

Summary of the answers

The following books had more than two votes. Four of them were mysteries and two of them were non-fiction!

Love or Money	3 votes
Gulliver's Travels	2 votes
Newspaper chase	2 votes
SHERLOCK HOLMES	2 votes
The Cheese Rolling	2 votes
Titanic	2 votes
WHITE DEATH	2 votes

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Discussion

When presenting our results we addressed some of the major discrepancies between Classes A and B and offered some theories about which variables could have prompted them. Now we plan to discuss the sum of the results from both classes, thus smoothing out the discrepancies and allowing us to ignore the minor variables. Using the sum of both classes doubles the subjective sample to approximately 120 students, and now our results become statistically significant. We shall also discuss the primary goal of using these forums; i.e. to raise the student's awareness of specific aspects of the ER program. This consciousness raising increases their motivation and even helps some of the students trigger the emergent phenomenon of autonomous learning.

For the question "Do you think you will continue reading graded readers extensively after this class is finished? Why do you think so?" 71% said that they would continue, 21%

said that they would not and the rest were undecided. Even if half of the positive students were only reporting what they thought the teacher wanted to hear, that still leaves 35% with the intention of continuing to utilize ER as part of their quest for autonomous learning.

For the question "Do you like extensive reading or do you hate it?" 64% of the total number of students claimed to like it. Again, it is best to attribute 50% of the positive answers to trying to please the teacher, but that still leaves 32% of the total students likely to have a positive attitude towards ER. This is almost exactly the same figure as provided by question #1, and thus lending more credence to the fact that it is statistically significant.

For the question "Which books do you prefer to read, Longman Penguin Readers, or Oxford Bookworms?" 63% preferred Oxford Bookworms to Penguin. This does not tell us much about the students themselves, but more about the quality of the publishing houses. The real purpose of such a question triggers the knowledge that they actually like one set of books more than the other, and the act of making a judgment call based on their own preferences subliminally transmits the idea that they like ER, and this positive reinforcement strengthens their motivation to become autonomous learners.

For the question: "What genre do you like to read? Realistic novels, SF, mystery, thriller, romance, history, a guidebook, non-fiction, ethnic story, fantasy, poetry, legend, biography, adventure, short stories, humor, or other (please specify the genre)." The totals came out as follows:

Mystery	28%
Adventure	15%
SF	12.5%
Non-fiction	12%

For this question, the more interesting findings come from comparing each class as it might explain the preference for one company over the other. Otherwise, the main purpose of the question is similar to the previous one, i.e. to subliminally remind them that they like ER books, and further nudge them towards autonomous learning.

The final question asked of both classes was: "What was the greatest obstacle that prevented you from reading?" To determine the totals for both classes we combined Class A's responses of "sleepiness, fatigue," and "busy, can't concentrate",

[busy, can't concentrate]	52.5%
[awareness of being bad at in English, lack of reading skills,]	36.5%
[can't find interesting books]	8.5%

The most interesting thing about these figures is that they are almost exactly the same for both classes, indicating that these are the major impediments to implementing a successful ER program. Again, the unstated purpose of this question is to raise the students' awareness of the obstacles to reading and thus make it easier for them to address them.

Conclusion

As is stated in the admission policy of our university, it is our goal to transform students into autonomous learners and that was the chief goal of our research, as well. Besides using the Forum plugin in Moodle to gather data for our research, the immediate feedback from both teacher and peers gives our CALL students practice with reading and writing to give their opinions on various aspects of ER. Writing spontaneously and with little pressure to be grammatically accurate, the students were not only able to stretch their cognitive skills, but were also able to subconsciously increase their motivation for engaging in even more extensive reading.

The simultaneous interaction between students and teachers that was both moderated and facilitated shows conclusively that a CMS can be utilized much more efficiently than any off-the-shelf software merely designed to help students focus on taking a limited and very specific test such as, the TOEIC or TOEFL tests. Writing Forum entries is a content-based exercise tied directly to the homework assignment of the specific class that the students are studying. The questions themselves were designed around the theme of extensive reading to subconsciously increase the student's motivation and encourage them to become autonomous learners, rather than to become robotic rote-memorizers of the random answers for a business, not science, focused test.

Though it obviously requires a greater investment of the teacher's time and intellectual energy to design textbook-related activities and to coordinate and evaluate forum posts it is obvious to anyone with even a modicum of intelligence that a customized CMS that addresses the student's needs and actually relates closely to the subject being taught is superior to any generic, off-the-shelf, overpriced software designed to utilize Pavlovian conditioning to train students to answer the multiple-choice test for a TOEIC, TOEFL, or other officially sanctioned test which are irrelevant to the acquisition of production skills and also to the formation of autonomous learning habits.

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