Development and Use of an EFL Reading Practice Application for an Android Tablet Computer

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the use of an English-language reading practice application for an Android tablet computer with students who are not native speakers of English. The application materials for vocabulary learning in reading-passage contexts were created to include words from a database of low-frequency and technical noun-verb collocations which occurred frequently in certain documents related to the study of international affairs. The learning materials were used in an English for specific purposes course intended to support the reading skill development of students studying international affairs at a university in Japan. Research showed that use of the learning materials had three positive influences on students’ study behavior: the students’ reading speed increased without a loss in comprehension; the students enjoyed the reading practice with the tablet computer; and they appreciated that the use of the tablet computer had merits that differed from reading practice in hard copy formats.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Reading Practice Application, Study of International Affairs, Tablet Computer, Vocabulary Learning

INTRODUCTION

Students who are in the Department of Global Affairs at a university in Japan have four English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses in the core compulsory curriculum during their four years of university studies. These four courses are English for general purposes courses. Although these students do not major in English language studies, many of them are expected to have high levels of English proficiency for study and for career purposes.

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The focus of their studies, in mainly Japanese-language compulsory and elective lecture courses, is on three areas of international affairs: International Relations, International Business, and Global Regional Studies. These courses use English as well as Japanese readings. Courses in these three areas could be strengthened by the creation of materials that promote the learning of unknown words that occur frequently in English international affairs texts, and by requiring students to carry out course learning tasks, such as reading English texts, which includes the target vocabulary, in order to make analytical oral and written reports using the new vocabulary.

A proposal has been made to establish English for specific purposes (ESP) courses which would be linked to Japanese-language international affairs courses and replace the current English for general purposes course. Accordingly, in order to investigate an approach to vocabulary learning in the proposed ESP courses, as a first step, reading passages on International Relations and Global Regional Studies topics were written for a mobile Android tablet computer operating system. The key words of the reading passages consisted of the words on a 550-word English vocabulary list of low frequency and technical noun-verb collocations which was compiled for this project. The words on the vocabulary list were selected, according to teachers’ views on the words’ usefulness in international affairs courses, from the first stage of this project’s database of commonly occurring noun-verb collocations taken from a corpus of approximately 1.3 million words drawn from thirty English-language annual reports of United Nations organizations which are accessible on official websites, also from English-language annual reports and other articles from the websites of twenty international non-governmental organizations.

These documents were chosen to develop vocabulary and reading learning materials for international affairs ESP courses for two reasons: 1. these texts are related to required readings used in International Relations and Global Regional Studies courses; 2. the English texts are written for an international audience which mainly includes native speakers of the world’s other languages.

**English for Specific Purposes**

English for specific purposes was formalized as an area of EFL study in the early 1960s (Johns, 2013). In this project, ESP was defined as an approach to EFL teaching, adapted from views described by Anthony (1998) and also Dudley-Evans (1998) with the following characteristics:

1. ESP is defined as EFL study which meets the needs of the learners in a specific discipline, i.e. international affairs;
2. ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and the topics of the discipline it serves, i.e., reading original texts of international organizations;
3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these topics in terms of the grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre. In this case, the special and common vocabulary of the major organizations engaged in international activities is the center of the language study.

As the ESP field has evolved, the focus of teachers’ attention has moved away from the transmission of grammatical and lexical knowledge to how knowledge is delivered to the learner. This shift of attention has transformed ESP into a strongly learner-centered and learning-centered field (Gatehouse, 2001). ESP research has, in recent years, looked deeper into the actual acquisition of language. What motivates learners to acquire ESP knowledge and what needs do they have? What strategies are employed by ESP learners? These questions are central matters in the design of ESP materials, as this area continues to be refined and developed further (Gatehouse, 2001; Johns, 2013), especially at the university level where students often are expected to have already achieved general English proficiency.

In terms of vocabulary learning, ESP texts are thought to be more accessible for learners,
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