Would a "Rational Approach" Improve Academic Outcomes in English Language University Classes in Vietnam?

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"One is never taught a language. One can only learn it." A. Gethin

Abstract

This study examines the impact of the rational approach (Gethin & Gunnemark, 1996) on academic outcomes, as an alternative to mass-marketed ELT textbooks with communicative language teaching (CLT) speaking tasks. A group of eight second year university students was taught how to select authentic texts, read at their own pace, and collect new vocabulary independently. Students applied this method for ten weeks, two classes a week. The number of vocabulary items collected, number of questions asked, and results of a pre- and post- TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) reading comprehension test were recorded. Correlations between behaviours and TOEIC scores were calculated, and students' capacity to adopt the method in the cultural and educational setting of Vietnam was examined. While the pre- and post- tests yielded negligible results, this approach appeared to motivate the students in a way that seems unusual in this setting.

Introduction

This study examines the "rational approach" (Gethin & Gunnemark, 1996) that uses students' self-directed exploration of language. For the past fifteen years, I have taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Vietnam. This experience has led me to question the effectiveness of the mass-marketed curriculum materials often used for teaching English. From the time I arrived in Vietnam, there was a steady schedule of English classes, full of eager students. I taught in various settings, from language institutes with part–time evening classes for teens and adults a few days a week, to full-time day school for middle and high school, and private instruction at companies one or two days a week. I worked at a college that had a full-time intensive English language certificate program, with three-hour classes five days a week for twelve weeks, over four course levels. Our college increased class time from fifteen to twenty hours a week by adding two classes in the afternoons, in an effort to boost student success rates. When class times were increased with no changes except for putting students through more of the same kind of lessons, I began to question this intense program of lessons and reliance on the textbook, and its methods.

In this article, I will outline a study I undertook as part of a twelve-week course that used learners' self-directed reading, in the presence of a teacher to answer any questions, as its mainstay. In the first part of this article, I will briefly explain the instructional and the ELT context in which the study was undertaken. In the second part, I will describe the methodology, and attempt to evaluate the experience of this study from the point of view of the students and the teachers.[1]

Part 1

The Vietnamese Language Education Context

Traditionally, the Vietnamese education system is teacher-centred, with large classes in which the transmission-of-knowledge model is followed. Tran Thi Tuyet (2013) contends that though administrators, lecturers and outsiders criticize Vietnamese students as being passive, "it is the rigidity of the system that causes such meek behaviour."In observational studies of students in Hanoi, Thompson (cited in Tran Thi Tuyet, 2013a) found that if the teacher takes on the role of authority and transmitter of knowledge, students adopt a passive learning style, but if the teacher is engaging and interactive, students become active and engage in class activities and contribute to the discussion.

Vietnamese students, however, emphasize on accuracy of recall, as do students from other Asian countries. Frequently criticized in the West as a rote approach, in the East "memorization with understanding" is used as a strategy for a deep approach to learning (Chalmers & Volet, 1997, p. 89). In this approach, students go through a series of steps, in which they first simply memorize the information, but later apply it in a deeper way. Biggs (1998) found that many Asian students believed information should first be learned thoroughly in order to allow them to apply it. Thus, for learning a language, they expect to first be explicitly taught its grammar or rules, as they want to learn everything they need to know before speaking.

The Vietnamese Context of ELT

Foreign teaching methods have been steadily becoming the mainstay of Vietnamese ELT since the Ministry of Education made it a part of its new directives starting in the 1990s. This usually results in the same syllabus, taken from the ELT textbook's contents page, being implemented, the same materials taught, and the same methodologies applied to a wide variety of courses. These courses may be for government officials to learn international communication, for engineers to learn to read texts in their respective fields, for high school and university students preparing to live and study abroad, and for elementary students in after-school institutes (Brogan & Ha, 1999). Once I applied to a large university, the most prestigious foreign-based university in the country. To prepare for the interview, I was sent a page from the textbook they would use. It was from the same textbook I had used for 4th graders at evening classes in a language institute.

I was surprised at how much every aspect of students' learning and class time was determined by an ELT course book and accompanying material (hereafter textbooks), one of the same half-a-dozen or so brands, all based on the same method. For EFL in Vietnam, the textbook and the teaching method it brings are synonymous with "curriculum," and unquestioningly accepted (Dang Tieu Yen, 2005).Teachers are required to teach every lesson and every point in the textbook, regardless of the type of course or the students (Breach, 2005). In the many kinds of settings and varied ages I worked with, typically the only difference was the length of time spent in the classroom, since each used the same kind of textbooks, with the same approach and teaching methods. Once I tried to vary the curriculum: I helped a language school

import several boxes of used books on a variety of topics from a city library used-book sale in the United States, to supplement reading instruction. Unfortunately, the books were treated as precious, students were not allowed to take them to read at their leisure.

For Vietnamese students, access to books and libraries could be described as very limited and inadequate (Tien Phuong, 2010; Tin Tan Dang, 2010). In a survey, most Vietnamese University students said textbooks with basic knowledge are their main materials (Nguyen Hien, 2012). A survey by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) found that 20 percent of colleges and universities do not have a library. Other schools have "libraries with no soul", i.e. "no books" (Nguyen Hien, 2012a). Of the 172 libraries in colleges and universities, only 38.9 percent were able to meet standards; 39.7 percent of schools, or 77 schools, reportedly have e-libraries.

Problems with the CLT Approach

The CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) approach of the textbooks does not have its own techniques for teaching vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, as against the traditional grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods it replaced (Tan, 2005). The assumption is that if students are put into activities or tasks, they will naturally learn the language through use. Students are to use their own words, but it can seem as if they have no words at their disposal for the interactive language task.

At several English language schools, students are not allowed to use dictionaries. This leaves them without a resource to understand the text. The ban also extends to materials with translations into the native language and use of the native language in class.

Teachers have to expend a great deal of direct instructional time in front of the whiteboard to somehow explain the vocabulary in the text being read. This instructional time replaces time for students' own search for meaning from the context, or efforts to read independently.

I do not have the space here to enlarge specifically on my experiences with CLT in Vietnam. I shall only say that similar difficulties were reported by teachers in a survey. Four specific problems surfaced: (i) lack of motivation for communicative competence (Tran Thu Thu Trang, 2007); (ii) resistance to class participation (Le Pham Hoai Huong, 2004; Pham Hoa Hiep, 2007); (iii) using Vietnamese during group work; and (iv) low English proficiency (Bock, 2000, p. 25). "These new methods simply do not work given our students' learning style, our culture, and our context" (Pham Hoa Hiep, 2007, p.3). Often when working in speaking lessons, the students were evasive, and actively tried to undermine the language objective of the lesson, or digressed in creative ways. They were exhibiting the kind of resistance described by Holliday (2006) as "social autonomy"—a group resistance to being taught by methods that do not cohere with their worldview. Such local strategies for solving the task-based group and pair work language activities of CLT classrooms is appropriate linguistic and socio-cultural behaviour (Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996), and an indication of the curriculum's irrelevance to local contexts (Truong Bach Le, 2004).

From what I could observe, in several cases students emerged from the twelve-week course with less accurate English and a no larger vocabulary than when they started. Very weak students usually did not improve noticeably. Many students participated and followed instructions but were not able to use English independent of the tasks and dialogues of the textbook; they were not able to use English to express ideas in talk that they had initiated. Students were "following the agenda" of the lesson but not "appropriating that same agenda for their own purposes" (Kinginger, 2002, p. 255). On the other hand, the smartest, most able students nearly always started with a high speaking and reading ability because they had either gained proficiency at high school, or on their own. Typically, a successful student had a private tutor or was already able to use English well enough to participate in the activities given in the textbook. These bright students found the classes too long and tedious.

A Successful Non-Conformist

There were some teachers who did not comply with the prescribed curriculum and came up with their own ways of teaching. One college teacher I shared a class with did not follow the curriculum or prepare any lessons at all. The only paper he took into class was the lineless, 8 inch by 11 inch photocopy paper, which he used for all exercises, from surveys to drawing plans to brainstorming. Sometimes, he brought in board games and speaking activities from the recourse pack of extra material, or a movie or a music CD. Being a co-teacher in a class with him was difficult because he would routinely disregard the textbook chapters, leaving the co-teacher to try and catch up. When I looked in his classroom, I saw a variety of activities, where students were all doing different things. Some were speaking to him, others were working on their laptops, still others were reading a book or reciting lines from a play or a movie, and some students were not doing anything. The class seemed to be completely chaotic; the students seemed to have taken charge of the space. They were involved with making movies or projects for much more time than our curriculum permitted. Yet, despite the apparent chaos, the class

and the teacher got along very well, working as a unit. His students developed strong speaking voices in English, and by the end of the course they seemed to be able to express themselves with confidence in fairly accurate English. Also, they seemed to have more outgoing and positive personalities. This raised the question: given a curriculum that cost so much and required so much time and concentration from the students, was it not significant that not using it at all seemed to be just as effective (if not more)?

The Rational Approach

In Gethin's approach, students are taught how to observe and notice language in a rational way while reading or listening. Students make meaning of the target language through cognitive processes that they initiate and guide. I became interested in Gethin's approach after reading an online essay about what Gethin described as an unchecked proliferation of expensive language schools, along with an ELT industry that perpetuates an orthodoxy of lessons which adhere to mass-marketed materials and methods which are unquestioningly accepted but do not work: "what actually happens is that students pay these enormous sums to be *prevented* (italicized in original) from doing what they want to do: learn the language efficiently. . . It is only when they escape from school that they can truly begin learning—if they know how to do it the right way" (Gethin, 2002). This seemed to be a fairly accurate description of the situations I experienced while teaching at language programs in Vietnam.

Prior to this study, I corresponded by email with Gethin. He gave some suggestions: have learners keep a book to log their progress, writing down any new words or grammar points that interest

them. He also said he would not know what to do with students in such a time-intensive class, and suggested I teach for 1/10th of the time and let them learn for the rest of the time. The same pace and degree of learner choice in reading materials has been suggested by Amritavalli (2007) and Lomb (2008), and in Krashen's (2004) comprehension hypothesis and advocacy of free reading.

The preference for whole class learning is a feature of the Vietnamese context that the "rational approach" accommodates. Indeed, Gethin calls for a kind of teacher-fronted instruction that invites and expects spontaneous discussion, and is geared toward individual responses in the large group setting:

> If languages are going to continue being taught in classes, the old fashioned method of the teacher talking to the students ("chalk and talk") is still the best. . . . There should be nothing old fashioned about the manner in which the teacher talks. The talk has to be completely informal and flexible. (Gethin & Gunnemark, 1996)

In this approach, the teacher's role is to introduce students to ways of learning, and be a source of correct information. The teacher should be a strong authoritative presence in the class, yet be engaging and flexible with students' needs and questions, independent of lesson parameters; and support students as observant learners responsible for their own learning. In the beginning, teachers need to show students how to observe and what sort of things to observe, but then they must step out of the way and allow them to learn, and check on their progress periodically. When a teacher tries to present information for you to learn by reading to you, choosing books for you, setting lessons, or selecting words for you to notice, it often becomes a kind of interference that actually slows

down or prevents comprehension and acquisition (Gethin, 2002). Others in the ELT field have described similar effects (Marcel, 1875; Krashen, 2004; Amritavalli, 2007; Lomb, 2008). Gethin's (1997) "rational approach" to language learning is a type of self-directed learning (SDL) in ELT that relates to the concept of Learner Autonomy.

Part 2

Overview of the Study

This was a study of self-selected individual student reading of authentic texts at the students' own pace. The course ran two days a week for ten weeks for one and a half hours each day. In the first week, there was a tutorial in the methods of the approach. Then the students worked in class with the teacher present to assist them and answer any questions. There was a pre-and a post-test, using Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC, a standard test often used in tertiary courses in Vietnam), and two other triangulated data points: a checklist record of the number and type of each students' questions, and student-created learning logs. The data were analyzed for correlation between the size of vocabulary collected and gains on TOEIC test. During the study, students had at least three one-on-one talks with the teacher, who made notes of their progress and comments on the method.

Participants

Participants were students at a foreign language and technology university in Vietnam in the second year. They were at the pre-intermediate level of EFL at a university where most students were language and communication majors. The study group had a total of eight students. This small size may have been due to the school's decision to not award any grade or points for the course. At the presentation of the course, twenty-five students registered and signed research subject agreements. Thereafter, the ELT director of the university asked that the research be conducted as part of a speaking and conversation class. When the researcher explained that the focus of research was on language input through reading, the ELT director wanted to know which text or reading material the teacher would select for students to read. When told that the language material would be student-selected and self-paced, the director decided that no credits could be given for this course because there "was no curriculum". After that, only eight of the twenty-five students who had registered actually attended the course.

Procedure

The proposal was to replace CLT textbook methods with authentic reading sources selected by the students themselves. These included magazines, storybooks, textbooks or books from the university library. Students were to read at their own pace. During the first week, the teacher explained the basic principles of self-teaching and learning techniques and strategies. A text sample selected by the teacher was used to demonstrate techniques of guiding one's own reading comprehension, including using a dictionary, "guessing" the meaning from the context, and discerning items that needed to be looked up in the dictionary from those that could be guessed at. Students would be responsible for their own grammar knowledge, but had the option of receiving explicit explanations if they so requested. Students were instructed to keep a daily log of their observations, vocabulary and reflections

on things to remember, and their mistakes.

The teacher showed students slides of different types of authentic texts for comparison. The class had to identify the difficulty level of each text, the different purposes they fulfilled, and text resource types (e.g.: periodical, journal, ESL learning book, business English magazine, novel, children's novel). Strategies were explained for understanding unknown words using context clues such as adjacent words, and grammatical aspects of parts of speech and sentence structure. Basic sentence grammar concepts (subject, verb, pronoun, preposition, tense, and aspect) were reviewed. These kinds of exercises are known as focus-on-form (Long, 1991), or consciousness-raising (Sharwood-Smith, 1981). Students also worked on texts with missing words (Cloze exercises). The whole class went through the process of predicting missing words, with the teacher presenting and discussing strategies to do so.

Using a Dictionary and Collecting Vocabulary

Students were shown slides of pages from different kinds of dictionaries and engaged in discussion considering the usefulness of each. They received and went over a text of the most basic phrases, to make sure they knew them all. They were given a basic vocabulary list of four hundred words to make sure they knew the minimum number of words required to read independently (Gethin & Gunnemark, 1996).They were asked to record in their log books new or unknown words that came up in their reading, discriminating between important new words and ones they did not need to remember.

Making a Working Grammar Chart

Students made a personal comprehensive working grammar chart on a sheet of 16 inch by 20 inch paper to review all the basic grammar they could remember, to make sure they were not missing any basic forms, and to understand the concept of a conscious working grammar.

Self-selecting Reading Material

Students were offered a variety of authentic reading material to select from in every class, and also to access the university library. This material included novels, children's novels, graded easy ELT readers, adult ELT essay readers, magazines, reading journals, instruction manuals, ELT textbooks and grammar books. Students were asked to read anything they wanted. This is essentially the idea of extensive reading (Bamford & Day, 1998; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983), free voluntary reading (Krashen, 2006; Mason, 2011), or learner-chosen texts (Amritavalli, 2007; Kumaradas, 1993). The concept of allowing learners free choice of the pace and content of reading is supported by these and other scholars (Krashen, 2004; Lomb, 2008).

Evaluation of the Learning Experience

I will present the evaluation of the rational approach in two parts. In the first part, I describe an attempt to empirically measure the gains. In the second part, I present an experiential account of the activity of self-selected reading.

Primary Research Question and Empirical Data

The results of the TOEIC pre-test and post-test were inconclusive. Nearly all score changes were within limits for standard error of measurement (SEM), and standard error of difference (SEDiff), as stated by the designers of TOEIC (Prolingua, 2016). The graphs in figures 1 and 2 present the students' pre- and post-test scores, together with the amount of self-collected vocabulary, arranged according to descending order of self-collected vocabulary. The numbers assigned to students however reflect the order in which their reading choices have been individually discussed. Again, there appears to be no correlation between vocabulary and TOEIC score.

This confirms the insight in a comment by Krashen, that one would not obtain strong results in a twelve-week classroom study using student-selected reading (Krashen, 2010, personal email communication). Research in self-directed reading and free voluntary reading is usually done over a longer time period (6 months to a year, or even two years). In addition, the TOEIC is not considered to be an effective tool for measuring individual progress, especially in the short term (Andrade, 2014; Childs, 1995).
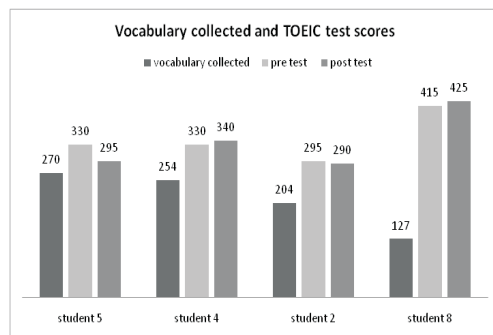

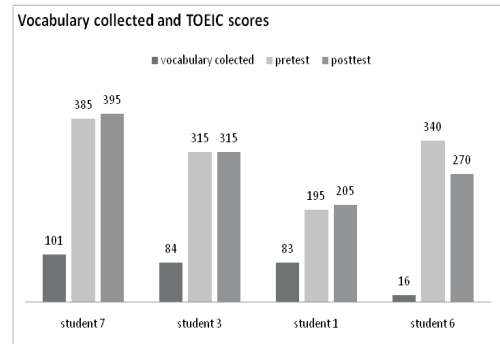Figure 1. Vocabulary collected and TOEIC test scores for students 5, 4, 2, and 8.

Figure 2. Vocabulary collected and TOEIC test scores for students 7, 3, 1, and 6.

The data on student-initiated questions and amount of vocabulary gathered also yielded no significant findings. Overall, the number of questions recorded was rather low (less than one question per student per class), suggesting that students either did not know when to ask for help, or were confident of their own abilities to learn. Students tended to ask about very distinct and memorable language usage problems. One student asked me to explain the subjunctive verb case in an article in National Geographic. Another student asked about sentences that lacked a subject and appeared to be a fragment that did not make logical sense; this required explaining ellipses and implication as well as the recursive function of some English sentences. One student asked about a sentence with mixed tenses that did not appear to make sense. This was because there was a hidden narrator and characters with different perspectives. They asked about unusual nouns specific to the topic and words not found in a dictionary.

Evaluating the Students' Reaction to the Self-Directed Learning Method

My observation of students and interviews with them indicate that the students

adapted well to the self-directed learning method. After initial hesitation, students were able to take on the learning techniques of self-directed learning and decide what they wanted to read. When asked about their reading choices, they all gave thoughtful and clear reasons. When the students made presentations about words or phrases they had learned, the class was attentive and asked questions. They responded to the method by applying themselves to the course right until the end. It appears that they easily took to their role of "rational" self-directed learners and even enjoyed it. This finding supports the claims of Vietnamese researchers (Thompson, 2009; Tran Thi Tuyet, 2013a; Le Van Cahn, 2004) that students would like the chance to have more autonomy to make decisions about their learning if conditions are set for them.

"A Book Buffet"

To compensate for the inadequate access to reading materials, I brought in a variety of books and magazines from the United States and the United Kingdom to each class in two suitcases and backpack, and placed them out on tables in the front of the room. Students called this the "book buffet", and they appeared very interested and pleased with this arrangement. This positive reaction of the students was significant, because it was an indication of a level of acceptance and comfort in a culture where group meals are the primary focus of social life.

Findings from Interviews with Students about Their Choices and Progress

The student-selected texts seemed to accord with their personal preferences.

This was indicative of a "more real" process in their interacting with the new language, which brought out their own ways of working with language, grammar and topics. Each student seemed to have their own unique adaptation of the learning approach.

Student #1 read entire elementary level books for young readers (totalling over 150 pages). Her language level and pre-test scores were the lowest (in the upper elementary range), and it was difficult to have spoken communication with her in the beginning. She selected an easy reader Pirates of the Caribbean (Disney's Junior novelization), and kept at it steadily every day. During the vocabulary presentation, she shared interesting examples of the parts of a large sailing ship. She asked for books on constellations, and read the one I gave her. She also read other children's books. By the end of the course, her speaking was noticeably better.

Student #2 was interested in reading IELTs and grammar (she did exercises on relative and adjective clauses, and gerunds versus infinitive verb phrases), but she also read short articles from Reader's Digest (about 5 pages), and tried to read a few chapters of several elementary level books (about 150 pages). She switched from one book to another and from one story to another without completing them. She was the only student who did not appear to take to the conditions of the method. She kept asking for instructions on what to do next, and was not able to explain the contents of what she had read. I carefully went over a passage with her in Forster's dystopian science fiction short story, The Machine Stops (Forster, 1928), to explain the story she had read. However, I found that she did understand, even the subtle points. Despite that, she did not think it was useful for her to read slowly enough to comprehend completely. She said her goal was to increase her IELTS score, and

often questioned the purpose of the method we were following, since she said it did not teach the test-taking skills she needed for scoring on the IELTS.

Student #3 started by reading some stories and textbook articles, but then decided to focus on grammar exercises in a bilingual textbook. She followed a systematic approach and wrote the answers to the exercises in her notes. The book featured different kinds of sentence patterns, with substitution exercises and fill-in-the-blanks. She did not take part in extended reading, but her way of learning was in line with the method of the approach, which suggests doing grammar exercises if one is so inclined and enjoys it. She reported that she found this kind of study satisfying and interesting as it was like solving a puzzle. She felt the course was time well spent in being able to review and consolidate her knowledge of language forms and patterns, and that her confidence and ability at English had improved.

Student #4 was interested in reading short novels, and stories from collections. She read a story for two weeks and then abandoned it because she did not like it. She then chose stories from an (out of use) high school textbook, following which she read five stories from a fiction book Love Stories. During the course, she brought several books to donate to the class book collection. She was very enthusiastic about the course and had the best speaking ability, but was absent a lot of time. She reported having learned a lot and felt more confident about using English for communication.

Student #5 read an out of print English as a second language (ESL) literacy textbook (low-intermediate level, with single page readings and comprehension questions). She then tried to read all the National Geographic articles, and essays in an upper-intermediate level literacy textbook. She had a very deliberate and

careful approach, reading and taking systematic notes. The amount of vocabulary collected by her was the highest, and her notes and questions were very specific and thoughtful. This student reported a lot of improvement in terms of her comprehension; she seemed to focus on vocabulary more than anyone else in the course.

Student #6 tried many kinds of books and texts, and finally gravitated toward lower intermediate level reading. He also finished reading a technical manual for driving. He only read one or two pages of three National Geographic articles. He finally settled on a 5th grade science textbook whose topics included "Weather", "Where does wind come from?", "Inside a Cave", and "Icicles in stone". He was interested in minerals, cameras, space and caves, and asked for clarification for a sentence explaining the formation of stalactites and stalagmites. At first, I did not think he was able to comprehend enough English to self-direct his reading, because he did not say much when I asked him about what he was doing. However, as the course continued, he was able to talk more confidently about his progress. He believed he had improved a lot. He became very specific about the questions he asked. I was surprised at the amount of reading he had covered because he was so quiet in the beginning (entire book comprising 126 pages of 3rd grade level; 2 chapters of an adult level book; and 2 other readers (Upper Intermediate level).

Student #7 started by reading Reader's Digest, but did not enjoy it because the writers appeared to be complaining and dissatisfied with their lives in a way he could not relate to. He took up American history and authentic American texts. He decided to move on from these as well after encountering many archaic words. He felt Thoreau to be boring and difficult to relate to. He did not want to read National Geographic because it appeared

to focus on war or conflict. Instead he read an anthropological book about the history of human kind, which he found to be satisfactory (he read 3 chapters, 66 pages). He said that the first texts did not "come to life" for him, and it always seemed like he was reading a foreign language slowly, by translating every word. By the end of the course he was reading the anthropology book. He said that he could get much more out of it, and that the words made an impression on him. He thought the course really helped him by allowing him to exercise his mind and learn language differently.

Student #8 was interested in reading either thriller novels or ghost stories. She read one article: "Creatures from hell"; two chapters of a novel, and one entire novel of 416 pages. This student read more than any student, and read at home every day as well. She reported being very involved in the storyline of the novel, and also that it was a rewarding experience to learn English by reading this way. She did not ask many questions, except about unusual meanings not found in a dictionary. She asked about sentences in which the subject was omitted or which contained references outside the sentence, such as ellipses. She described being able to sense and feel and experience the book much the same as a movie or a story, and was surprised that she could read a foreign language book so smoothly. She asked the least number of questions.

Summary and Conclusion

The students' selections of reading materials are reflective of their variety of interests and approaches to reading. Their choices reflect individual themes and preferences for their learning directions. Further, the student-chosen texts appear to be centred around their level of

difficulty, which suggests that students are able to adjust their selection process to their level, and adjust their focus to gap areas in their own knowledge.

One of the most rewarding things about this approach was seeing a new appreciation among the students for extensive independent reading as a part of language learning. In discussions, all students reported an improvement in their understanding and comfort with speaking in English after spending so much time reading English texts. Reading what they wanted at their own pace with a teacher as guide, appeared to transform students into confident speakers, especially when talking about the stories or ideas that they had come across in their reading.

Vietnam has its own education system, and it would be a big assumption to think that a different system could be incorporated into it even in the smallest way. In Vietnam the concept of a student browsing and selecting their own material to read independently as part of their education is not commonly accepted. Where curriculum is delivered by the institution and teachers only deliver the items in the curriculum, it is not realistic to recommend a learning method, where the basic conditions and activities are not generally accepted, understood, or permitted.

Yet the "rational approach" (Gethin & Gunnemark, 1996) includes a practical set of learning techniques. In the present case, this approach gave the students a chance to become confident speakers simply by allowing them to select the topics and vocabulary based on their interests and efforts. While it was very different from what they were used to, it seemed to be an improvement over rigidly following textbook tasks.

This study fell short of finding evidence of the positive effect of this method. However, given the observed and reported

positive effect on learning, it would be a good idea to try a more involved classroom study with a larger group, or a more sensitive form of evaluation than the TOEIC, which has been described as a "rough measure of overall ability" (Andrade, 2014, p. 19). It may also be a good idea to look at the impact of increased access to authentic reading material on speaking proficiency or confidence, and at student and teachers' attitudes to availability of books in Vietnamese schools.

Notes

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