Class Activities That Supplement Graded Readers
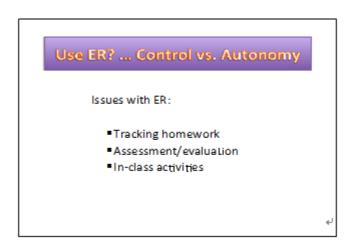
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ABSTRACT

Teachers who might otherwise include graded reading in their class syllabus sometimes choose not to because -- though they recognize the value of extensive reading -- they do not know how to exploit graded reading homework in subsequent lessons. Furthermore, many teachers are limited in their choice of classroom applications because of various hurdles such as narrow syllabus, test preparation demands, limited physical resources, skeptical administrators and parents, among other reasons. This presentation will offer activity templates that can be used with graded readers in various classroom situations. Types of activities presented will include those that support class goals that involve reading skills and strategies, vocabulary and grammar building, communicative activities, and writing.

INTRODUCTION

When teaching reading, teachers are faced with the decision of choosing between an intensive approach (IR), or an extensive approach (ER). IR's advantage is that its (usually) common content allows more teacher control of classroom activities and student assessment. ER's advantage is that it is that students feel empowered by their autonomy and they read material at an appropriate level to them. Proponents of each approach find it difficult to incorporate the positive aspects of the other into their chosen approach.

The challenges that IR teachers usually deal with in an ER environment is tracking homework, doing evaluations, and developing stimulating communicative class activities that relate to the texts. ER proponents struggle with how to incorporate the skills and strategies elements of IR, as well as vocabulary and grammar.

In this presentation, I present ideas that bridge this divide. In some cases, I offer broad templates that can be adjusted according to circumstances, and in other cases specific examples.

I will deal with three types of teaching situations:

1. Intensive Reading course focus
2. Communicative courses
3. Vocabulary building

I will also distinguish between single readers and whole-class readers. Single readers (or self-readers) means that students chose their own book – few students will have read the same book that week. Whole class readers mean that all students have read the same book that week.

ESTABLISHING A COMMON REFERENCE TEXT

Firstly, it is important for teachers to establish a "frame of reference" early in the course. When students have read their self-chosen GRs, a teacher might face difficulties in getting students to comprehend fully what is expected of them in a follow-up activity. Referring to a story that all students know alleviates this problem. For example, *My Neighbor Totoro* or *Chibi Maruko-chan* can be used to model how the students are to approach finding main ideas, supporting examples, predicting, etc. Similarly, it is useful in explaining how to complete communicative, vocabulary, or grammar activities. It is advisable to, if possible, assign a whole-class graded reader in week one or two of the semester to assure that a common reference text is established.

CHECKING HOMEWORK

The reason that the closed and controlled nature of an IR reading approach is sometimes favored by teachers is that, unlike ER, one set of comprehension questions, or other testing methods, is all that is needed to determine if a particular student actually read (and comprehended) the reading passage for homework. In an ER environment, teachers usually rely on standardized summary reports, or various internet sites that have programs that offer quizzes for various GRs, record the number of words read, as well as other tracking information. The ER method is more subjective than the black-white IR schemes, but a determination as to whether students are actually doing the reading is possible.
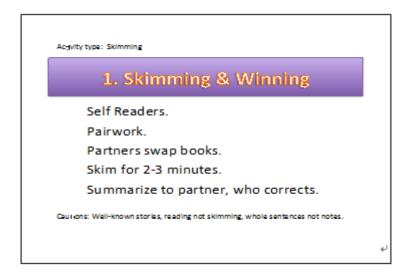
ACTIVITIES

Part 1. Activities for IR courses

 Idea 1: Skimming and Winning

The first activity is called 'Skimming and Winning.' It is a pairwork activity that practices skimming and scanning and concludes with a communicative activity in which students orally summarize. Its purpose is to get students to look at text quickly and get the gist and it concludes in a communicative activity in which the text is used as the basis for language exchange.

Benefits: Skimming, scanning, summarizing, confirming & clarifying orally.

Activity type: Skimming

1. Skimming & Winning

Self Readers.
Pairwork.
Partners swap books.
Skim for 2-3 minutes.
Summarize to partner, who corrects.

Cautions: Well-known stories, reading not skimming, whole sentences not notes.

Procedure: Student will have read all or part of a graded reader for homework. Students A and B exchange their GRs and each skims the other's book for 1-2 minutes. Each partner then summarizes his findings verbally (or written) back to his partner. A simple chart can be used to focus students' attention. The chart lists the '5Ws' questions. The GR reader listens and confirms or corrects his partner's summarization as it proceeds. The chart can have a scoring scale 0%-100% allowing the listening partner to gauge the level of accuracy or thoroughness of the summarization. This of course is judgmental, but helps focus the pair on the task and allows the teacher to use it as an assessment tool – giving extra points to those students who have clearly understood the gist of the story. The teacher can determine 'winners' through this method, creating a friendly competitive environment that hopefully adds a motivating element to the activity.

Taking this activity further can allow students to appreciate the strategy of prediction. After the steps above have been sufficiently completed, the summarizing student can predict how the story evolves and/or ends. This often requires to GR reader to offer the predictor enough context with which to organize a plausible (or outrageous) plot scenario. For example, a student might create an ending to the Wizard of Oz
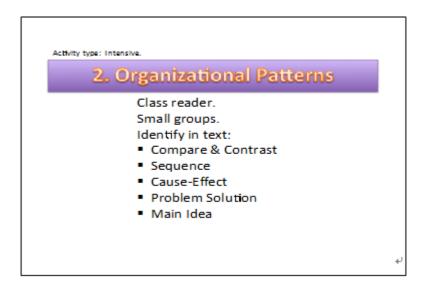
Considerations: This of course does not work with whole class reader. Also, well-known stories (i.e. *Titanic, Anne of Green Gables, etc.*) undercut the value of the exercise. Teachers intending to use this activity should, when assigning the homework, discourage students from choosing well-known stories. Finally, teachers should stress note-taking, not sentence making, by the listening partner.

Note taking during this step can be optional, but it gives teacher an idea of student's comprehension.

Idea 2: Organizational patterns

Graded readers are rich in opportunities to teach organizational patterns (compare and contrast, cause and effect, etc.). In classes where organizational patterns have already been taught (with the IR text book or other means), single readers can be used. Otherwise, a whole-class GR is recommended.

Benefits: Recognizing organizational patterns in texts, both micro and macro.

Activity type: Intensive.

2. Organizational Patterns

Class reader.
Small groups.
Identify in text:
- Compare & Contrast
- Sequence
- Cause-Effect
- Problem Solution
- Main Idea

Procedures: This can be done as homework or as an in-class activity. In either case, students should have already read their book. As an in-class activity, the teacher should create a group of 3-5 students. For a whole-class reader, each student can be assigned to identify one of the common organizational patterns, and present it to the group, which in turn can suggest improvements. Teachers can also use this as a chance to focus on signal words that commonly appear in the different patterns. If single readers are used, teachers should allow more time for the student to first summarize the story to the group. This gives the listeners enough context to comprehend the reader's explanations. The teacher should provide a worksheet for students to use.
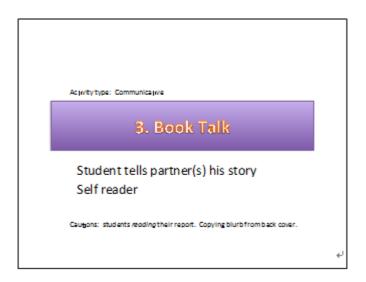
Considerations: Students should be assigned GRs which contain a narrative. GRs that deal with (Oxford's *Factfiles*) often do not lend themselves for this type of activity.

Part 2. Communicative courses

Idea 3: Book talk

This is an effective and motivating activity that prompts a lot of oral communication.

Benefits: Oral fluency, vocabulary acquisition, negotiating meaning.

Procedures: Students read a self-reader for homework and prepare to tell successive partners, individually, about the story for 2-4 minutes in the following class. A written report, which includes a summary and personal feelings about the book, is a good writing exercise (for homework). It can also serve as an assessment tool for the teacher.

Considerations: This activity is, obviously, not suitable for whole-class readers. Also, teachers should warn to students to not copy the blurb from back of the GR. Finally, students should not simply read their report to their partner. They should be encouraged to use their own words.

Students will tell various partners about the book they read.   Switch partners every 6-8 minutes, and repeat. Then have a short discussion about it. You should summarize the basics of the story, explain the characters, etc.

Idea 4: Story Re-tell

This activity stresses oral summarizing by the speaker, and negotiating-for-meaning skills of the listener. It is a challenging activity that makes use of the four skills in support of achieving and transmitting clear oral communication.

Benefits: Oral fluency, vocabulary acquisition, summarizing, confirming, clarifying, note-taking, and skimming and scanning.
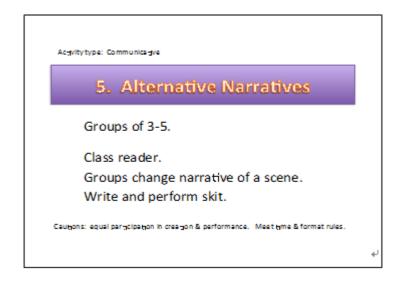
In class, the teacher should make groups of three, and designate student A, B, and C. All student Cs leave the room. Student A tells to B a summary with details of the story. Student B listens, then tells C. As B is re-telling, B can confirm with A by asking clarification and confirmation questions. C takes notes, and re-tells the summarized story to A (asking B for help if necessary), who checks accuracy. The process is repeated by A leaving the room, and B summarizing his story to C, who in turn will re-tell it to A, etc. If time allows, students can then together skim through each book collaborating, expanding, or clarifying information.

Considerations: This exercise is not suitable for a whole-class reader. The teacher should tell students not to copy the blurb from back of the GR. Time limits are highly recommended. Minimum one minute for lower-level students. Teachers should also look out for summaries that are too short. The listening student should take quick short notes, not write sentences, which slows down the activity considerably.

Idea 5: Alternate narratives

This activity allows students to create dialog with ready-made characters in a known context. However, it also allows student creativity, as well as an opportunity for the teacher to focus on particular learning aims.

Benefits: Vocabulary acquisition, conversation strategies, plot development, speech acts in context.

Activity type: Communicative

5. Alternative Narratives

Groups of 3-5.

Class reader.
Groups change narrative of a scene.
Write and perform skit.

Cautions: equal participation in creation & performance. Meet time & format rules.

Procedures: This activity works best with a whole-class reader. After students have read the book, the teacher creates groups of 3-5 students. The groups then set about to revise the outcome of a scene in the story. This can be a time-consuming activity, so time limits, word counts, sample revisions, and clear directions are necessary. Captains should be assigned to each group and a lead stenographer as well, though all members should keep pace and fill out their dialog template. A-4 templates with dialog boxes should be provided. This will help the teacher, when circulating around the room giving advice, to deal with a common format for each group. Otherwise, students might resort to writing their scripts on whatever odd-sized wrinkled and used paper scrap that they are able to dig out of their backpacks.

Groups should be clear on the outcome of their revision so as to not get bogged down in the course of dialog creation. Teachers must also mandate that certain language-use thresholds be met, lest the resulting be dialog be a series of one-sentence retorts. These thresholds can include, for example, that a certain number of compound sentences be included. Another might be that at least every actor must have at least one part in which he speaks for 20 seconds, or disagrees with the protagonist, etc. Students will then act out the revision in (the next) class.
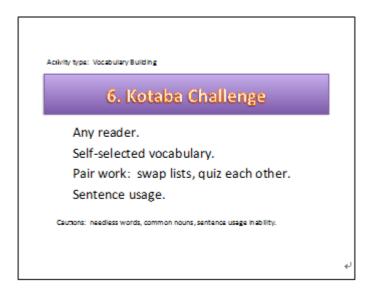
Considerations: Some scene re-makes require different number of students. One technique to give enough parts to everyone is to create a narrator who can easily fill in gaps. Sometimes students take too much time deciding on which scene to alter.

Idea 6: Vocabulary building:

Vocabulary acquisition by students -- and assessment by teachers -- in an autonomous learning situation can be both easily accomplished and very effective. It requires weekly monitoring by teachers, making sure that self-

18

selected vocabulary items are both relevant and are being reviewed in context regularly.

Benefits: Vocabulary acquisition

Procedures: The teacher provides a blank template on which students should collect 5-10 new words per book read. During their reading, students keep a list that includes the word, its root and variants, etc. and write a sentence with the word in it. For practice and assessment, the teacher puts create pairs of students. Each student will exchange his vocabulary sheet with a partner, and each partner will then quiz the list-owner, asking the other for a translation of the target word, and prompt the student to use the word in a sentence. This can also serve as a quiz, in which case the students themselves correct and record the score. The teacher then collects it.

Considerations: The teacher should monitor the vocabulary lists weekly, checking for needless words (which should be crossed off the student's list), and that the student has used the item in a sentence.

<u>APPENDIX</u>

(Note: These templates have been reduced in size to save space.)

Idea 1. Skimming and Winning

Take short, quick notes. Not sentences!
Scoring: A lot = 4 pts.   Enough = 3 pts.   A few = 2 pts.   Too few = 1 pt..

	A lot	Enough	A few	Too few
Who				
What				

Where				
When				
Why				
Sequence				
Cause-effect				
Problem-solution				
Main Idea				
total				

Idea 2. Organizational Patters

ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS in *(となりのトトロ)*

In the story, find examples of the following organizational patterns:

1. Compare and contrast:
Ex: Satsuski is very open and friendly, but Kenta is very shy and nervous.

2. Sequence:
Ex: In the beginning, they were getting used to their new environment. Soon the girls discovered dust bunnies, Totoro, and the neko bus. They then used these new friends to help them solve some problems.

3. Cause and Effect:
4. Problem-Solution:
5. What do you think the main idea of the story is?

Idea 4 Story Re-tell

Directions: Listen to your partner summarize his/her story to you. You may take notes (try in English but some Japanese okay) but may not write sentences. Ask questions to your partner to get more meaning or information. Then tell that story to your next partner, summarizing clearly the main points of the story, and how they connect to one another. Finally, listen to your next partner tell the story back to the original partner. You should help him with his explanation by listening while he speaks, correcting or adding relevant information, and answering any questions.

Idea 5 Alternative narratives

Directions: Choose a scene or section of a story, and change certain events, or the outcome. Keep the original characters, but you may add one new character if you need to. You will act it out in the class in front of the other students.

Rules: All members must speak at least 15-20% of the total dialog. Time limit is between _____ and _____ minutes. Your group must provide a written

summary of the situation so that viewing members understand the context. You must have a narrator (it can be one of the actors if necessary). Dialog and actors' movements or other narrative must be written on this template.

Group information:

Group Number: 1	Student:	Role:
	Chie Wada	Harumi; mother
	Takashi Takeda	Yusuke; son

Action sequence and dialog template:

No.	Character	Dialog or directions
1	Nararator	The mother discovers that her son has not cleaned his room.
2	Mother	I have told you twice to clean your room! Why haven't you done it!
3	Son	My favorite program was on TV! Then I took a nap!
4	(action)	The mother takes the remote and turns off the TV.
5	Mother	You are too lazy, and you don't listen to me! I am going to tell your father!

Idea 6: Vocabulary building

Self Vocabulary List (SVL)

Directions: During your reading this week, choose five words that will be useful to you in your future. Find the correct Japanese translation (there may be more than one), then write a sentence in English using the word.

	English word	Jpn translation	English sentence
1			
2			
3			

Self Vocabulary List (SVL) Quiz Scorecard

Exchange your Self Vocabulary List (SVL) with a partner. Write your partners name on the line below. Next, choose _____ (number of words) from your partner's list. Write them below. Then, quiz your partner by asking the following:

These words are from (student's name) _____ SVL.

- *What is _____ in Japanese?*

- *Use the word in an English sentence.*

English word	Jpn translation OK?	English sentence understandable?
1. predict	すいそくする OK	OK
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

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