

Students' Progress and Attitudes in an Extensive Reading Class

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Abstract

Introduction

Two common problems facing second language (L2) learners in Japan is gaining exposure to the L2 outside of the classroom, and finding opportunities to use it for communicative purposes. An extensive reading (ER) approach with graded readers (GR) is an effective way to expose students to the L2. Incorporating it into a communicative approach in the classroom can help solve the second problem mentioned above. That extensive reading has enjoyed explosive growth in recent years reflects educators' recognition that reading graded materials is effective in developing learner's reading fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and motivation.

A main reason for this growth is that ER aligns naturally with basic human motivation. People naturally pursue activities that they enjoy, and usually avoid those that they consider unpleasant. Admittedly, this explanation is simplistic, for there are factors other than pleasure that motivate people. The sense of fulfillment and confidence that comes with achievement, a desire for self-determination, and greed – doing what one must to get what one wants – are also powerful motivators. Schools and teachers at all levels in Japan and elsewhere in Asia have been, in recognition of this “pleasure principle,” increasingly including some ER in their foreign/second language curriculum. But ER is no panacea, and is not without its critics. Administrative gatekeepers in many schools see ER as burdensome and costly. Academic gatekeepers complain that, in addition to being difficult to measure achievement, ER is irrelevant to the testing and test preparation culture common in Japanese schools. Some critics challenge the learning gains claimed by ER proponents.

This author set out to see where his students fall in amidst these various claims. He conducted a series of classes based on an ER approach but with oral communication elements. The objective was to determine reading habits and gains in reading fluency. They study also measured students' attitudes towards reading grader readers as a method for English learning, and their attitude toward various communicative activities that were tied to the books that they read.

Research Review

By its nature, an ER approach signals an acceptance of Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis. Written as $i+1$, the Input Hypothesis argues that learners acquire a second language most efficiently if they *regularly* are given a lot of *comprehensible* input. This includes language already acquired, as well as items and structures that are just beyond their proficiency level. In this way, learners will then bridge these gaps of meaning through various methods of negotiation. An ER approach deviates somewhat from the $i+1$ model by adopting an $i-1$ model, which encourages texts that are fairly comprehensible to the reader, requiring less negotiation of meaning by the learner.

The benefits of ER have been demonstrated in numerous studies. The benefits include gains in reading speed, comprehension, motivation, and increased interest in L2 reading by students (Jones, 2008; Kusunagi, 2007; Murphy, 2007; Lemmer, 2006; Day & Bamford, 1998; Mason & Krashen, 1997a; Nation, 1997; Contantino, 1994; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983). Success in developing L2 competence must, of course, derive from motivation. Motivation

theories abound regarding what pushes or pulls students to seek or reject acquiring a foreign or second language. Most theories advanced today are rooted in the expectancy-value theory, which claims “behavior (is) determined by the expectance of success, the value of incentives, the need for achievement, and the fear of failure.” (Apple, 2005). Studies by Apple, 2005; Day & Bamford, 1998; Mason & Krashen, 1997a and others report on the various theories of motivation and what motivates students to read in English.

One finding that appears consistently in the research, and in this author’s experience, is the satisfaction and surprise that many first-time or reluctant L2 readers experience when they finish their first graded reader (GR). Many are surprised that they finished an entire book, that they understood it, and that they enjoyed the experience. Having succeeded once, many are motivated to try again. While this increased level of motivation is relatively easy to maintain during an academic semester, motivating students to read voluntarily is a bigger challenge. Students often report in surveys that they would like to continue to read in English on their own, but the number that actually do so is considerably less. In Burke (2006), 53 percent of students said that they “want to” read in English, and 95 percent “will continue to read” in their free time. Enbody (2005) found that 78 percent of his respondents said that they would continue to read GRs on their own time. However, he then found that 35 percent had read books in English during vacation. That gap between intention and actual follow-through should not surprise nor discourage teachers or administrators. On the contrary, these findings are both revealing and encouraging in two ways. First is the fact that so many students indicate a willingness to read GRs independently. The other revealing point is the finding that some (Enbody’s 35 percent, for example) actually *do* read independently. Unfortunately, the other studies did not ask about actual independent reading behavior. But Enbody’s 35 percent is impressive. It is worth wondering what percentage of students read their conventional, skills-based *intensive* reading textbook on their own time. Experience suggests very few.

Students often attribute the drop-off in reading books in English (RBE) after their English class is finished to lack of time, access, and resources. This highlights the importance for schools to design a curriculum that includes ER systematically and thoroughly, rather than in the one-off way some universities presently include it. Repeated exposure is essential for maintenance of gains in vocabulary, fluency, appreciation, and other benefits. (Day & Bamford, 1998; Nation, 1997; Krashen, 1997a,b).

Numerous studies have found favorable attitudes toward ER classes and GRs. (Jones, 2008; Kusunagi, 2007; Lemmer, 2006; Hayashi, 1999; Day & Bamford, 1998; Mason & Krashen, 1997a; Nation, 1997). Students with high intrinsic motivation naturally like the experience of RBE. In regard to less-motivated students reporting positive attitudes, their positive feelings are primarily due to the satisfaction they felt at their unexpected accomplishment. But many of these students stop RBE when the motivation provided by an instructor’s homework assignment is absent. But this stoppage should not necessarily be understood to mean that they do not like reading GRs. The students’ reading success, as well as the opportunity to practice English in a way that allows them choice, independence, and pleasure (a pedagogy polar opposite of traditional English reading classes) generates the positive attitudes and intentions mentioned above, and also introduces students to a different way of developing their English proficiency.

Oral and writing activities in an ER approach

The benefits discussed above are not the only value of an ER approach. Gains are also realized in the classroom activities associated with the reading. Day & Bamford (1998) and Kusunagi (2009) found that written reports -- as a follow-up to students’ GR -- is highly effective. Such reporting allows the teacher to monitor progress and students’ attitudes. These reports also allow students to interact retrospectively with the story, the characters, and the

grammar and vocabulary. Another effective and popular type of activity is letting students discuss the stories in pairs or in groups. These allow students the opportunity to recycle vocabulary and grammar, engage in oral communication, and “expand their views and share someone’s experience through reading because they do not often contact people from other generations or in other social contexts.” (Kusanagi, 2009).

The ER Class

The classes in this study were a combination of ER and oral communication emphasizing communicative strategies (comm strats). The ER element of the course focused on finishing a graded reader (GR) for homework most weeks of the 15-week semester, and the student then writing a paragraph summarizing the story and his or her response to it. In the activity “Book Talk,” students told a partner about the book for five minutes then changed to a new partner. They changed partners 4-7 times. This took about half of the class time.

The Study

This study among first and second-year non-English majors at a national university in western Japan involving students in the faculties of Engineering (electrical), Humanities, and two classes of Science (biology, and earth science) students. In the first class, students were timed as they read a chapter of the graded reader *The Good Earth*, (Heinemann Intermediate level). In the second to last class of the semester, they were timed again reading a different chapter of the same book. Both chapters were similar in setting and characters. Students were also asked about their reading habits. In the last class of the semester, students were interviewed in small groups in English or Japanese, and interviewed about their attitudes and opinions toward the class.

Due to the subjective nature of qualitative data, general categories (*positive* and *negative*) were established for reporting purposes. Each of these categories was further divided into *class* and *activities*. *Positive/class* responses were grouped into *enjoyed* (the ER experience was positive), *I like to read* (likes reading in general), *speed/skill up*, and *other*. Within *positive/activities*, subsections are: *discussion good*, *chain story* (a group writing activity), *oral strategies* (communicative strategies), *writing*, and *other*. *Negative/class* subsections are: *prefer another* (prefers oral English class to ER), *more talk* (emphasizing oral communication), and *other*.

Findings

The most significant quantitative finding involves the gains in reading speed (Table 1). The study showed an overall gain of about 29 percent among all students. What is notable is the consistency of the gains when broken down by individual classes. Although the reading rate (words-per-minute) as a class average varied between three of the four classes, the percentage gain in the reading rate remained consistent.

Table 1. Reading speeds before vs. after

Class	WPM 1 st class	WPM last class	Pct. Gain
Science I	60	84	+29%
Humanities	83	116	+28%
Engineers	61	80	+24%
Science II	105	154	+31%

The time that students spent reading comprehensible input (Table 2) -- 2 hours 30 minutes to 3 hours 15 minutes -- is considerably longer than a student would have spent reading a passage from a conventional intensive-reading (IR) textbook. In fact, the way that many students “read” conventional IR passages might not be considered “reading” in the usual sense. In many cases, IR passages are difficult for students, and they spend a great amount of mental energy is spent trying to process the meaning. They often, when encountering a non-comprehensible word, stop their reading entirely and consult a dictionary, which defeats the goal of fluency. Reading *intensively* can be justified if the purpose is to practice intensive reading skills. But often, these types of passages are typically followed by comprehension and vocabulary exercises, and other exercises of a closed nature.

Table 3 reflects the ubiquitous nature of the Internet and comics in Japan. Table 4 indicates students’ interest in various genre.

Table 2. Average time per week spent reading a GR

Science I	2 hrs. 30 min.
Humanities	2 hrs. 50 min.
Engineers	2 hrs. 50 min.
Science II	3 hrs. 15 min.

Table 3. What do students read?

Internet	21%
Comics	17
Novels	13
Newspapers	12
E-Mail	12
Magazines	11
Textbooks	11
Non-fiction	4

Table 4. Favorite topics and genres

Sports	30%
Romance	25
Fiction	20
Horror	15

Of the 131 comments in the interview transcripts that pertained to one of the research questions of this study, 75 percent were positive and 25 percent negative (Table 5). *Enjoyed ER Class* (47%) was the most-frequent response type (Table 6). Within that response type, seven respondents specifically said that the ER element of the class was difficult, but interesting or enjoyable nonetheless (appendix). Eighteen percent indicated some kind of achievement (*Speed/Skill Up*) and 14 percent said that they would take the ER course again. Twelve percent said that their liking of the course came from the fact that they like reading.

Table 5. ER Experience Overall

Positive	75%
Negative	25
<i>Total (n = 68)</i>	100

Table 6. Positive Class Comment

Enjoyed ER class	47%
Speed/skill up	18
Would repeat	14
I like to read	12
Other	20
<i>Total (n = 51)</i>	100

Table 7. Negative Class Comment

Preferred another	47%
More talk	29
Other	24
<i>Total (n = 17)</i>	100

Table 8. ER Activity Opinion Overall

Positive	65%
Negative	35
<i>Total (n = 63)</i>	100

Table 9. Positive Activity Comment

Discussion good	41%
Chain story good	24
Oral strategies	7
Writing	7
Other	20
<i>Total (n = 41)</i>	100

Table 10. Negative Activities Comment

More/other talk	32%
Partner	18
Story chain	14
Other	36
<i>Total (n = 22)</i>	100

Among the minority of negative comments about the ER class in general was the feeling by 47 percent (from a base of only 17; Table 7) who said that they would prefer a different type of course – oral communication being the favorite. Twenty-nine percent said that they wished the ER course itself was weighted more heavily toward conversation.

As for how the activities were judged, positive comments were made by 65 percent (Table 8) of the students. The favorite activity was discussion (Table 9), which meant primarily Book Talk, though there were other discussion activities as well. The writing activity Chain Story was also well liked (24%). Lastly, table 10 reveals the desire for oral communication class among the small number who reported a *negative ER experience overall*. Eighteen percent were unhappy about their partners, and 14 percent sited Chain Story as negative.

Discussion

The consistency of the increase of overall reading speeds for the two groups suggests that reading a lot of comprehensible input does, in fact, lead to greater reading fluency. What this finding cannot determine, however, is any gain in comprehension or vocabulary.

As for students' attitudes, The 3-1 ratio of positive to negative comments reinforces ER proponents claim that an ER approach is attractive to students, and it also coincides with the findings in many of the studies mentioned earlier in this paper. Additionally, only seven respondents claimed specifically that the ER element of the class was *difficult/enjoyed*. This suggests that most students were reading at an appropriate level, which is a critical point if ER is to improve reading fluency. My review of the Student Reading Records (not reported here) revealed that, indeed, most students felt that the books that they read were "at the right level." Further, that this *difficult/enjoyed* subset of students was able to enjoy the class despite its perceived difficulty is a positive, though this author is curious to know how much the difficulty interfered with L2 development.

Further evidence that the ER element confirmed proponents' claims is the two of the three remaining response types in the *positive/class* category. Nine (18%) said that their reading skill improved and seven (14%) said that they would take this class again, as opposed to only two *negative/class* students (appendix) who would *not* take the class again, and six saying that they would prefer a conversation class to ER. This finding, however, does not necessarily suggest students' dislike of ER, for it is possible that they valued the course, yet still prefer an oral communication class. A few comments to this effect can be found in the *class/positive* category in the transcript notes (appendix). The 18 percent of the *speed/skill up* responders sited various gains they experienced over the duration of the course.

The last of the four identifiable response types, *I like to read*, is a counter-weight to those *negative/class* students who prefer oral communication classes. It also offers a window into the kind of content students who read prefer. While this study did not measure students' attitudes towards intensive reading or intensive reading courses, it is fair to assume that students who say that they 'like to read' are referring to *reading for pleasure* (probably in the L1), and not teacher-selected intensive reading homework.

Of the 41 comments in the *positive/activities* category, 17 (41%) identified the discussion activity being good. Second to that was *chain story* (24%), the story-creating writing activity.

Conclusion

The findings in this study confirm those of other researchers in EFL environments at Japanese universities, and they again strengthen the argument that ER should be one of the cornerstones of L2 curriculums. Students obviously enjoy – or prefer - oral English. But communicative activities can easily be incorporated into an ER course, with graded readers providing a treasure chest of content and ideas for discussion. Students also enjoy feeling successful in the L2. That the subject matter is of interest, and the language is within their range, provides the motivation to read. The high levels of positive attitude toward this type of approach, when considered with the real reading gains measured in part 1 of this study, seems

to suggest that a communicative approach with ER is an obvious path toward better student performance (versus intensive-only reading classes) and attitudes toward reading in the L2 and the language and culture in general.

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Appendix

Sorted by comment. (note: some comments abbreviated and/or summarized for space.)

Positive Comments: Class

	ENJOYED ER CLASS	
A3	enjoyed	Liked class. It was good for me. I can read many books.
A5	enjoyed	I enjoyed reading many books.
A7a	enjoyed	Reading books was very good.
A8	enjoyed [but...]	If everyone read the same book it would be interesting.
A14	enjoyed	I liked class but I don't like (lack of) conversation. I want conversation.
A18	enjoyed	I really enjoyed this class. So I became to like English more.
H16	enjoyed	I liked everything. This class was much better than high school English.
H43	enjoyed [but...]	...I want more interesting books and different kinds of books.
H44	enjoyed	I would not change anything. It is good the way it is.
H47	enjoyed	Reading in H.S. was memorizing, etc. This class reading easy and fun, so enjoyed.
H48	enjoyed	Reading in English was not so difficult, so I enjoy it.
J7	enjoyed	Reading is important. Style of this class was very good.
J8	enjoyed [but...]	...I want more books – history, chemistry... different kinds
K2	enjoyed	Fun. In Science class, we have to translate sentences
L1	enjoyed	Reading a book is interesting.
L2	enjoyed	Reading book interesting.
M32	enjoyed	I enjoyed reading. J. education is writing so this class was good experience for me.
A12	difficult/enjoyed	At first, I don't read English book because difficult.... [inaud] but I liked books.
A21	difficult/enjoyed	... the books I read are difficult, but interesting.
A22	difficult/enjoyed	I enjoyed it, but new vocabulary is difficult to explain.
A23	difficult/enjoyed	It was difficult, but I enjoyed it.
A32a	difficult/enjoyed	Reading books and writing was difficult but very interesting.
H18	difficult/enjoyed	Enjoyed it but it was difficult to talk at length about the book.
M23	difficult/enjoyed	Reading was good. Difficult but tried hard because it was interesting.
	I LIKE TO READ	
A9	enjoy reading	Interesting because I like reading books. But I have little free time.
A10a	enjoy reading	I enjoyed this class. I like reading.
A17	enjoy reading	I looked forward to this class. I like reading and teacher is kind.
I6	enjoy reading	I liked reading, but not speaking.
I7	enjoy reading	I like reading more than speaking. Speaking, I have no control. Books are at my pace.
H30	enjoy reading	I like reading, but frustrated if there was too much work in other classes.
	TAKE AGAIN	
J31	would repeat	Would take class again.
J32	would repeat	Would take class again.
K5	would repeat	Prefer ER to conversation (K6-8 prefer conv.) Would take class again.
M5	would repeat	I would definitely take this class again.
M6	would repeat	I would take this class again.
M7	would repeat	I would take this class again, too.
M8	would repeat	I want to take this class once more.
	SPEED/SKILL UP	
A16	skill up	Reading books helped my vocabulary.
H29	skill up	After 2-3 weeks, 50 pages no problem. My speed increased. I could enjoy stories.
J1	skill up	I want to increase reading speed for TOEIC. Reading is very interesting.
J3	skill up	I didn't like E books before, but I learned in this class E. books interesting. Speed up.
J11	skill up	My confidence is up.
J14	skill up	I've never read E book for class. My vocabulary is poor. This was very useful.
J22	skill up	Homework was difficult but good. My reading skill improved.
J26	skill up	When I finished a book, I said "tashika!" I did it!
I4	skill up	My reading speed increased. I want to read more.
	OTHER	
B1	motivation	I read Secret Garden during vacation by myself.

A4	write	Good point was WBR. I can write many sentences. Bad point was silent Ss
I5	happy but...	I like speaking more than reading, but I'm happy I took class.
J29	1 st English book	I never read English novel, so it was fresh. So interesting!
H9	other	Partner explanation interesting. I learned about other books I wanted to read.

Positive Comments: Activities

	DISCUSSION GOOD	
A6	Discussion good	Speaking about the book was difficult but fun.
A7b	Discussion good	Book Talk very good. I want to know other's feeling.
A10b	Discussion good	I want to listen to many things about the book.
A11	Discussion good	Me, too. [agrees with 10b]
A13	Discussion good	ER was very interesting because I talked with partner.
A21a	Discussion good	
A27	Discussion good	It is practice to speak one's opinion....
A29	Discussion good	Time for pair work was OK. More kinds of activity.
A40	Discussion good	
H17	Discussion good [but...]	... I wanted to talk with more different partners.
H20a	Discussion good [but...]	If partner same level book, enjoyed. If not, not.
H38	Discussion good	I thought ER would only be HW, but talking was good.
A41	Discussion good	
J5	Discussion good	I enjoyed telling my idea. I liked it better than writing.
M1	Discussion good	I enjoyed talking about the stories
M3	Discussion good [but...]	More time with each partner would be good.
M39	Discussion good	Book Talk interesting. I like reading so I like talking.
	CHAIN STORY GOOD	
A24	Chain story good	I like to make a story
I8	Chain story good	I enjoyed the Chain story – I can learn spelling
I10	Chain story good	I liked the Chain Story. It was fun.
J11	Chain story good	
J21	Chain story good	
J30	Chain story good	
M22	Chain Story good	I liked Chain Story. I like surprises.
M31	Chain Story good	This was good, but make it a longer exercise.
M33	Chain Story good	Each student had many opinions, so it was good for us.
M40a	Chain story good	I enjoyed class, especially Story Chain and Book Talk
	ORAL STRATEGIES	
A33	comm strats useful	Conversation control techniques were useful
I9	comm strats useful	Communication techniques were very useful.
M37	comm strats useful	Strategies very important for us to talk with foreigner.
	WRITING	
A30	Writing oppty wanted	I want more writing activities. We might need in future.
A32b	Writing interesting	Writing was difficult but interesting.
K1	WBR (written report)	good experience, but hard
	OTHER	
A42	'Math' quiz	
A39	'Math' quiz	
A19	General enjoy	I like games, Christmas songs, math game
A20	Games	I enjoyed it. I liked games.
H40	Variety good	
L3	Crossword	The Crossword game was fun.
A28	Mr. Bean	More Mr. Bean would be good.
A31	Mr. Bean	Mr. Bean.

Negative Comments: Class sorted

	PREFER ANOTHER	
J13	Prefer conv. class	would choose conv. class over ER - Std 1
J14	Prefer conv. class	would choose conv. class over ER - Std 2
J15	Prefer conv. class	would choose conv. class over ER - Std 3
K5	Prefer conv. class	would choose conv. class over ER - Std 2
K6	Prefer conv. class	would choose conv. class over ER - Std 3
K7	Prefer conv. class	would choose conv. class over ER - Std 4
J33	Would not take again	Wouldn't take class again
J34	Would not take again	Wouldn't take class again
	MORE TALK	
A14	conversation wanted	
A15	conversation wanted	Wanted more conversation practice
A26	conversation wanted	More speaking is better
A43	conversation wanted	I want even more conversation
H38	conversation wanted	more ER discussion
	OTHER	
A4	silent students	Bad point was silent students. Very few responses.
A8	same book	If everyone read the same book it would be interesting.
H19	nervous	I was nervous talking to people I didn't know
I3	discussion difficult	I used a lot of Japanese. Too difficult.

Negative Comments: Activities sorted

	MORE/OTHER TALK	
A25	more talk	Wanted to speak with teacher
A26	more talk	More speaking is better
A34	more talk	I wanted more discussion.
A43	more talk	I wanted more conversation.
H45	more group talk	I would like to do groups of 3 or 4.
J4	more group talk	Too much one-to-one. I wanted group talking.
J17	more group talk	
	STORY CHAIN	
A37	story chain wanted	I like writing chain story.
A38	story chain wanted	I enjoy that (chain story), too.
A24	story chain wanted	I like to make a story.
	PARTNERS	
H46	wants frequent partner change	It's better to change partners frequently.
K4	more partners	Book Talk too long; change partner more.
H17b	more partners [but...]	... Book Talk good.
J9	different partners	I want to speak [with] everyone in the class.
	OTHER	
A36	want grammar games	I want grammar games.
A28	Mr. Bean	More Mr. Bean activities would be good.
A31	Mr. Bean	[no comment]
A29	more variety	Not just one kind of activity.
A30	writing	I wanted more writing practice
K3	not academic	Cannot help us read Science book
L4	too much Japanese	Too much Japanese.
L5	variety of books	There should be more books about chemistry, science.