

*Original Article*

# The Effects of a Level-appropriate Extensive Reading Course on Two Students' Views of EFL Reading

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Reading helps us to learn about the world around us and to learn our mother tongue. Our students naturally experience and enhance their extensive reading (ER) skills in Japanese in their youth through leisure reading but seem to have trouble applying that same skill-set when reading in English. This paper examines the effects of a one-semester long ER course on two students' English reading skills, vocabulary, grammar and reading level, as well as concurrent changes in their perceptions of reading in English due to the course. After describing the Extensive Reading C course within which the research was set, the author presents and discusses the students' responses to a three-item survey. It concludes that appropriately levelled, sensitively paced, guided, mid-term duration ER in English can have a positive impact in all four of these areas.

**Keywords:** Reading skills, Vocabulary, Grammar, Reading level, Perception

## Introduction

Reading is considered fundamental to learning, as well as to improvements in a range of linguistic, literary, affective and cognitive factors that support that learning (Reading is Fundamental, 2018), both within mainstream education in general and foreign language learning in particular. Reading plays a central role not only in acquiring new information in a particular field of study, but in learning the vocabulary, spelling, grammar and punctuation usage of one's own language (L1) and of other languages (L2) that one might be learning. With sufficient reading, one can also become familiar with discourse level genre conventions (Krashen, 1984; Janopolous, 1986) such as those associated with academic writing. Flower & Hayes

(1980, p. 28) concur: "[A] well-read person simply has a much larger and richer set of images of what a text can look like".

As children, many of us were encouraged by our parents to read story books in our free-time to develop our L1 knowledge and usage. Without understanding the distinctions between intensive reading (IR) and extensive reading (ER), we selected books of personal interest and an appropriate level of difficulty then read them, often without reference to a dictionary, using textual and visual cues to try to guess the meaning of new words. We used our imaginations to visualize scenes and to predict what might come next. If needing to refer back to find information given on a previous page, we selected and scanned the area of text most likely to yield that information. In doing so, we not only learned our L1 but also learned how to read (Day, 2011, p. 10) and thereby enhanced our proficiency in learning about both our language and the world around us. Therefore, if not innate, these ER skills might at least be considered to be developed to some

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extent in childhood.

However, applying those same skills when reading in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or other foreign languages (FL) is often perceived by our students as difficult, perhaps because the way EFL reading is treated in Japanese schools strongly foregrounds IR skills and pushes ER skills to the background with the result that the latter may become atrophied. Also, while ER can be fun and engaging, IR is by definition an intensive and demanding form of study which discourages some students from continuing EFL reading after their schooling has finished.

This paper examines changes in two sophomores' perceptions of EFL reading after a one-semester, level-appropriate ER course within the Department of International Liberal Arts (DILA) and discusses the causes of those changes.

### **The Extensive Reading C course**

In the second year Extensive Reading C (ER C) course's first lesson, the two students were given a level check to establish their baseline reading proficiency so that they could choose appropriate graded readers from the university's library. A print was also used to show the various distinctions between IR and ER. Thereafter, lessons used worksheets to raise students' awareness of, and repeatedly practice, core ER skills including:

- predicting what comes next;
- guessing the meaning of new words without reference to a dictionary using various cues;
- visualizing;
- scanning;
- skimming;
- summarizing;
- comprehension checking and
- inferring

The students were then given time in class to read the graded readers of their choice and were encouraged to apply these various reading skills as needed. Most of the books included a glossary of the more advanced words used and the students were instructed to learn these new words before reading the book. Some of the books also included pre-reading questions to promote prediction and to activate relevant schema,

as well as during-reading and post-reading questions which the students were also encouraged to use to facilitate autonomous comprehension-checking. To enhance the relevance of these skills to the students, it was also pointed out that they can also be applied in the reading section of the EIKEN, TOEIC, TOEFL and other tests which they may take later.

### **Method**

To collect data on the students' experiences in the ER C course and their perceptions of EFL reading, the following setting, participants, materials and procedures were employed.

#### ***Setting***

This research was conducted in the second-year ER C course within DILA's curriculum at Chugokugakuen University. The course met for one 90-minute lesson a week for 15 weeks.

#### ***Participants***

Only two students enrolled for the ER C course: Taro and Satoshi (pseudonyms). When asked at the start of the course whether they had taken either of the prior Extensive Reading A or B courses in previous semesters, they revealed that they had not enrolled in those courses because they perceived that the required reading in English would be too difficult.

The level check conducted in the first lesson showed both students to be of low-level EFL reading ability and so were encouraged to select the lowest level (pink in the university library's graded reader colour code) to start with.

#### ***Materials***

The following materials were used during the course and data collection phase:

- the worksheets and prints mentioned above;
- the library's graded readers;
- the survey provided in the appendix and
- a printed list from library staff of the graded readers that each student had taken out.

#### ***Procedure***

The worksheets, prints and graded readers were used as described in the previous section. In the last

lesson of the course, the two students were asked if they would agree to complete the survey, which they did. Though not completed anonymously, they were assured that pseudonyms would be used in the research paper to anonymize the data. After the last lesson, I obtained from the library staff the printed list of graded readers loaned by each student. The students had been instructed at the start of the course to register every graded reader they read as taken out from the library, rather than just reading the book in the library. This ensured that the printed list for each student was complete and accurate.

### Results and discussion

The results will be presented and discussed with reference to improvements in EFL reading skills and grammar and vocabulary knowledge, as well as increases in reading levels and changes in perceptions of EFL reading.

#### *Improvements in EFL reading skills*

Survey item 2 asked whether the students' reading skills had improved. Taro responded that his use of pictorial cues in aiding comprehension had improved and that he was better able to summarize a book's context by using location-related and time-related information. Satoshi noted that his reading speed increased and that his ability to scan and guess the meaning of words using illustrations had improved. These skills were introduced at the start of the course to maximize the duration over which, and opportunities with which the students could apply them.

These gains are in line with those found by Takase (2009) with respect to reading speed and proficiency through teacher-supported Sustained Silent Reading.

#### *Improvements in EFL knowledge*

Survey item 3 asked if the course had helped to improve the students' English grammar, vocabulary, spelling or punctuation. Taro and Satoshi both felt that their vocabulary knowledge had increased. This may be in large part due to the emphasis placed on making good use of the graded readers' glossary section and using the new vocabulary in context. With respect to grammar, Satoshi also reported that "It's still difficult to decide which article to use but I'm starting to understand the cues that help me to decide". This

aspect of English grammar is perhaps one of the most difficult for Japanese to grasp, but that he managed to make some headway in this area over a relatively short time-period is a positive learning outcome.

#### *Increases in reading levels*

Taro started the course reading pink level books (approximately 75 headwords) and ended the course reading orange level (approximately 800 headwords). Similarly, Satoshi started reading pink level books and finished the course reading the more difficult, yellow level (approximately 1,000 headwords). This shows that, even within only four months, both students had made progress in terms of the graded reader levels they could comprehend. Given that their experiences on the ER C course had reportedly improved their reading skills and EFL knowledge, the gains in reading level and, as a consequence the enhanced perceptions of EFL ER are to be expected.

It is important to note however that Taro made less progress due to longer and more frequent periods of not reading caused by a higher rate of absence. This resulted in him reading only 13 graded readers. Conversely Satoshi, who attended more lessons, studied more conscientiously and read 21 graded readers, attained a higher level over the same time period. Indeed he wrote in response to item 1 on the survey that "My English reading level has improved more and more".

#### *Changes in perceptions of EFL reading*

In light of the two students' statement at the start of the course that they had not enrolled for ER A or B courses because they felt that the EFL reading would be too difficult, survey item 1 asked whether the ER C course had changed their image of English reading.

Taro reported that rather than being difficult, it was fun because he could select books that "matched" his level and that this was a good way to study. "That's why I liked English reading". He even recommended it to other students: "So this lesson is very helpful for others". Satoshi felt that the course was level-appropriate and therefore "comfortable". These statements highlight the value in one of ER's underlying principles stated by Day & Bamford (1998, p. 8): The students themselves, rather than their teacher, should select the books they read.

That gains in L2 vocabulary and grammar occurred concurrently with enhanced perceptions of

EFL reading, improved reading level and reading skills is in line with Takase (2009) and Pulido (2009), who states that “[i]n foreign language learning contexts, L2/FL reading development typically occurs simultaneously with the development of L2 knowledge and skills” (p. 37).

### Conclusion

The results of this case study suggest that overt instruction in ER skills presented early in a course, in tandem with sensitively, appropriately paced and levelled, guided, mid-term ER practice can positively impact students’ EFL reading levels, perceptions of EFL reading, EFL reading skills and knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar. However, ongoing practice would seem necessary to maintain and further advance the breadth and depth of these gains.

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## Appendix: The research survey

### Extensive reading research

At the start of this course you said that you did not study Extensive Reading A or B because you thought it would be too difficult. I would like to know if this Extensive Reading course has changed your ideas about reading in English, and if so, in what ways. I want to use your comments to write an article for the university's bulletin (紀要). Although I will include your comments in the article, I will not write your names. Your comments will be anonymous.

Also, your comments have no impact on your grades. Please write this feedback paper in Japanese and submit it to me after your grades have been submitted on February 1st.

The most useful comments are honest, considered opinions. This helps me to understand whether the course was useful for you, so please write freely, giving your frank opinions. There are three questions.

1. Did this course change your image of English reading? Why or why not?

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2. Have your English reading skills improved? Why or why not? How much?

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3. Has your English grammar, vocabulary, spelling, or punctuation improved? Why or why not? Give some examples if you can.

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