

*Original Article*

## A Study of Reading Gains as Related to Extensive Reading

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This brief paper examines and discusses the results of a two-semester study on reading improvement for first year English and Communication majors at two small junior colleges in western Japan. One group participated in an Extensive Reading (ER) program in conjunction with their Oral English classes. The other had similar classes but no ER. A pre-post test was administered to determine reading level improvements. Results indicate that the experimental group showed significant gains as a result of the treatment.

**Key Words:** Extensive Reading, EPER, reading improvement, reading fluency, graded readers

### A Study of Reading Gains as Related to Extensive Reading

The use of Extensive Reading (ER) in Japanese EFL classes has been steadily increasing since the late 1980s. In some instances classes devoted exclusively to ER have been established and when that has not been practical for whatever reasons, ER has been used as an out of class activity for existing conversation classes. There are a wide range of ER techniques and activities to help the reader progress, but what remains true throughout the varied approaches is that reading comprehensible material at the appropriate level, and in volume, is a key to becoming a fluent reader.

Claims can be found in the broad research published about positive affective results such as increased motivation (Constantino, 1995; Camiciottoli, 2001; Lemmer, 2001) and improved attitude (Mason &

Krashen, 1997), the influence of ER on improving writing skills (Krashen, 1991; Krashen & Lee, 2004) increased vocabulary acquisition (Coady, 1997; Horst, 2005; Nation, 1997), incidental grammar improvement, improved spelling (Krashen, 1993: 11-18; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006), increased reading speed (Bell, 2001) and improvement of scores on standardized tests such as TOEIC and TOEFL.

Having administered an ER program in conjunction with oral communication classes for a number of years, the author has measured significant gains in reading fluency and aptitude among those students who read in volume over four semesters. But due to department policy, no study could be done which used any of department classes as a control group. He therefore decided to undertake research to determine whether students, who are required to read 800 pages from graded readers in English during their first year of junior college studies, would improve their reading skills more than those at a junior college in a neighboring prefecture who had no reading assigned to their oral communication classes.

This study addresses the relationship between ER and improvement in reading skills. The main hypoth-

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esis predicts that there will be a significant difference between the pre-post test scores of the treatment and control groups. A second hypothesis predicts that the English conversation students who participate in an ER program and read 800 or more pages in two semesters will advance further in reading levels than those who do not.

## Methods

### *Participants*

First year junior college students from two schools in western Japan participated in this study. All were English or Communication majors and all were part of intact conversational English classes that met for two 90-minute classes a week. All participants attended other English classes taught in English and/or Japanese. Only those who were present on both the pre and post test days were included in this study. This resulted in thirty-seven students in the experimental group (N=37) and thirteen students in the control group (N=13).

The experimental group consisted of members of three classes at one school. These students read 800 or more pages in graded readers as an adjunct to their conversation classes. They also completed and submitted a brief report, designed by the instructor, for each book read. Although the classes incorporated the four language skill areas in the instruction, the emphasis in the classroom was on speaking and listening rather reading and writing. Nearly all reading was done with graded readers at levels determined by placement tests and later, instructor consultation. Students chose their own material, generally from their assigned level. The thirteen students at the second school had similar conversation classes, but had no extra reading assigned.

As is often the case when attempting to compare two groups at different institutions and with different instructors, the external validity and generalizability from the sample to the general population is questionable. Another problem is the limited number of participants in the control group. Forty-five control group students took the pre-test but due to an administrative change, the second semester of this course switched from being a graduation requirement to an elective class. This resulted in only 13 control group members taking the post-test. It is therefore ill con-

sidered to extrapolate the findings of this study to a wider population.

### *Design*

This experiment used a pre-post/experimental-control group design to determine differences in reading progress scores between the control and treatment groups. The dependant variable was the 800 or more pages of required Extensive Reading done by the treatment group.

### *Instrument*

The instrument used to measure reading progress between the groups was the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER) Reading Placement and Progress Test A. This is a 147 item cloze test developed by David Hill, which measures general proficiency and is correlated to the EPER designated reading levels. It is used to identify starting reading levels for students in ER programs and to measure progress throughout a program.

### *Administration*

Students had 30 minutes to answer as many of the questions as possible. Following the test guidelines, only answers that were spelled correctly and exactly matched those on the answer key were accepted as correct. The tests were administered in the first two and last two weeks of the 2005-06 school year.

## Results

This chart clearly shows that there was no difference between the experimental and control groups' EPER test scores before the extensive reading took place. It also shows that the control group did not demonstrate any improvement in the EPER test results after two semesters of instruction without ER, while the treatment group made significant gains.

The Tukey-Kramer pairs analysis also indicates significant improvement on the part of the treatment group with a probability of .05. Therefore it is 95% probable that the improvement is due to the ER treatment.

Table 1 indicates that when comparing all pairs, the only significant difference found is between the pre and posttest experimental group. Positive values show pairs of means that are significantly different.

Due to the small number in the control group a one-way Anova analysis would prove invalid.

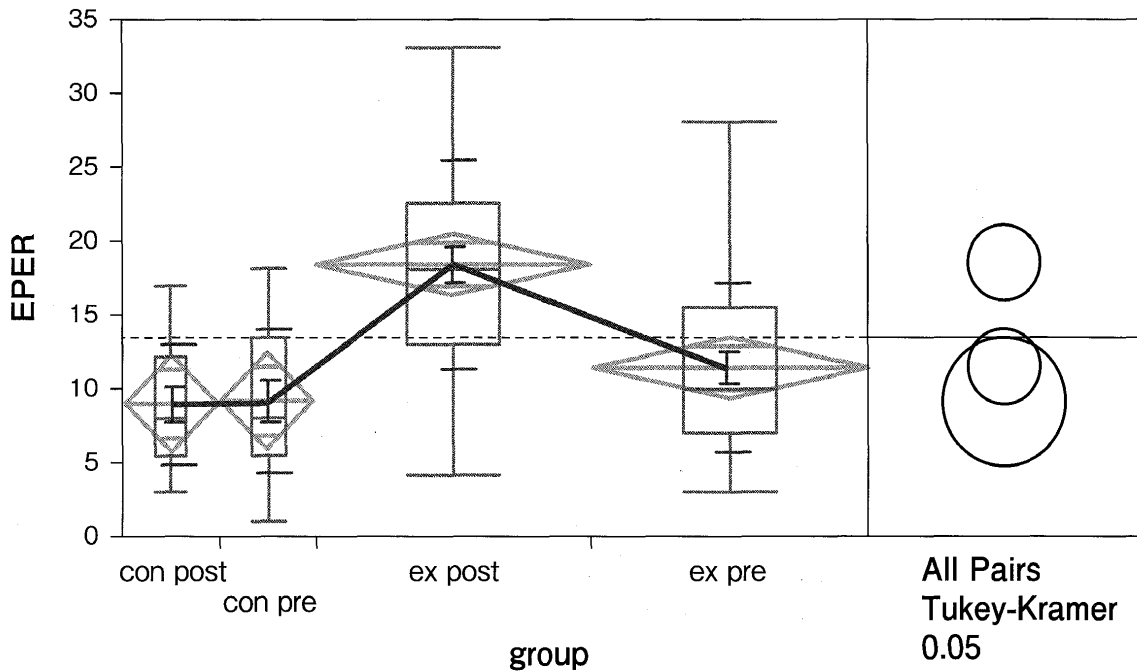


Fig. 1 Graphical display of statistical analysis

Table 1 Comparison of all pairs using Tukey-Kramer HSD

Abs(Dif)-LSD	Experimental post	Experimental pre	Control post	Control pre
Experimental post	-3.6881	3.3119	4.1599	4.2368
Experimental pre	3.3119	-3.6881	-2.8401	-2.7632
Control post	4.1599	-2.8401	-6.2221	-6.1451
Control pre	4.2368	-2.7632	-6.1451	-6.2221

p<0.05

Table 2 Wilcoxon/Kruskal-Wallis Tests (rank sums)

Group	N	Score sum	Score mean	Std Dev
Control post	13	428	32.9231	-2.340
Control pre	13	432	33.2308	-2.299
Experimental post	37	2598	70.2162	5.213
Experimental pre	37	1592	43.0270	-1.973

Table 3 Differences of ER reading levels after pre/posttest

Group	Start cards	G	F	E	D
Control post	5	3	4	1	
Control pre	6	3	3	1	
Experimental post	2	6	8	13	8
Experimental pre	10	15	8	4	

Therefore the data was analyzed using the non-parametric Wilcoxon/Kruskal-Wallis Tests. The results of the one-way ChiSquare analysis show a probability of .0001, indicating that there is a 99% probability that the gains exhibited by the post-test experimental

group are a result of the ER treatment.

Table 3 illustrates that the experimental group showed significant advances reading levels within the time frame of this study. Start cards represents the lowest level and D the highest among the partici-

pants.

### Discussion

It is extremely difficult to isolate one aspect of student language learning, such as ER, and profess that it alone is responsible for gains in any skill area. Schools are not sterile laboratories and one cannot expect an absence of influences from other interactions with the target language. This is the reality of the situation for most studies of intact classes of EFL learners. The results of this study, however, strongly infer that the ER treatment did have a significant impact on the marked improvement of the experimental group from pre to posttest.

In addition, test results demonstrated that the second hypothesis, which states that the experimental group members would advance in reading levels after the treatment, is true. According to the EPER system of graded reading levels, of the experimental group, eight had no movement, 14 advanced one level, 9 advanced two levels and six advanced three levels. The results for the control group were dramatically different. Four members of this group moved down one level, six remained at the same level while one advanced one level and one advanced two levels.

As previously noted, the gains cannot be attributed to ER alone, but it may be useful to briefly examine student feedback to see how the learners feel about ER and their own learning. As is evidenced by the quotes in Appendix 1, students felt that their reading speed increased, they learned new vocabulary, could read more fluently and reading in English became an enjoyable experience.

### Conclusion

While it may be impossible to prove that only the ER treatment was responsible for the differences between the two groups in this study, it is clear that those who participated in the ER treatment showed significant gains in their reading levels and test scores. Student feedback from end of semester evaluations provides evidence that the majority of students find ER to be enjoyable, informative and a worthwhile activity. These expressions of student satisfaction, in conjunction with the measured

improvement in reading fluency, should merit strong consideration by those considering the introduction of an ER program. Extensive Reading is not only a good way to learn a language, but it is one that students enjoy and appreciate.

Further research needs to be conducted with other instruments and experimental and control groups from the same institution thereby limiting independent variables. In future studies a larger sample would also help in providing results with stronger validity.

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### Appendix 1

This appendix contains replies from participants in the

experimental group to a feedback/evaluation survey conducted at the end of the 2005–06 school year, just after the EPER posttest. Among all respondents there was only one negative answer. The question from the survey is, “*Do you think that the reading homework helped you to improve your English skills? How?*”

“I’m not sure if my English skills improved. Now I like to read books in English and it became a good experience.”

“Yes, I think reading helped me to understand faster and easily than before.”

“I think I can read in English faster than before, so I would like to continue reading in English more and more.”

“I learned that reading is important for improving my English. And I didn’t look up unknown words in a dictionary ... Because I can read a English book more smoothly.”

“Yes. It was very well to be able to read faster and get a meaning easier.”

“Yes, of course. I think I can read English faster, and I became to like reading English books.”

“Yes. I could memorize some new vocabulary and idioms.”

“Yes. I learnt lots of grammar and words that I didn’t know. I also learnt the way to use the words. I am very glad to read.”

“I can imagine how the vocabulary means. And I can study English as I enjoy reading.”

“Yes, I can read smoothly than at first.”

“Yes, because I like reading so I read book everyday. They help my English. When I read I can get right grammar, etc.”

“Yes, it is very interesting because I can learn a lot of words.”

“Yes. I read many English. I could remember many words.”

“Yes. I think the reading homework helped me to improve my English skills. For example, I can read faster (than) before.”

“I knew many new words from the books.”

“Yes. It is good to improve my English skills. I can remember some words.”

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