

Original Article

Do they see what we see?: Student reading habits and perceptions of extensive reading

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This paper reports on the findings of a questionnaire given to university students participating in Extensive Reading courses. Results of student perceptions of improvement in the four basic skill areas are discussed. Student reading habits before and after the course are also examined along with their preferences in English language reading materials. In addition strategies employed by students to aid in reading fluency are examined.

Key Words: Extensive Reading, fluency, reading strategies, reading habits, student perceptions

Introduction

Extensive Reading (ER) has been continually gaining adherents among EFL/ESL teaching professionals, a fact attested to by the numerous research papers published and presentations made on the subject in recent years. Studies have demonstrated qualified improvement in learners' reading speed and fluency (1), comprehension levels, vocabulary acquisition (3, 12, 17, 13), writing skills (7, 5, 9) and standardized test scores (14, 18). This paper, however, does not directly address any of these areas. Instead, it reports on the results of a survey of student reading habits and reading strategies employed along with student perceptions of the benefits of ER before and after participating in a 15 week ER course.

A pre and post questionnaire (appendix 1) was administered to university students from two schools,

one public and one private, in western Japan. Those answering the questionnaire ranged from first to fourth-year students across a variety of majors. Both the pre and post questionnaire were administered in Japanese. The pre questionnaire was answered in the first lesson before any instruction took place and prior to any teacher explanations or discussion about ER. This was done to avoid any teacher influence on responses. The same questionnaire was administered during the last class to all those who responded to the first survey. One problem encountered in collecting the data was that since all participating ER classes were elective, many of those who took the pre-survey had opted out of the class and by the same token many who were there at the end, had not been present at the first class. Therefore the usable sample was not as large as hoped for at the outset. In total, 89 students responded to both pre and post questions.

Extensive Reading in action has nearly as many forms and it does adherents. Individual instructors utilize methods which may include only reading with no follow-up tasks, oral or written reports on books read, discussion groups, class readers and speed reading checks. Although students in this study were

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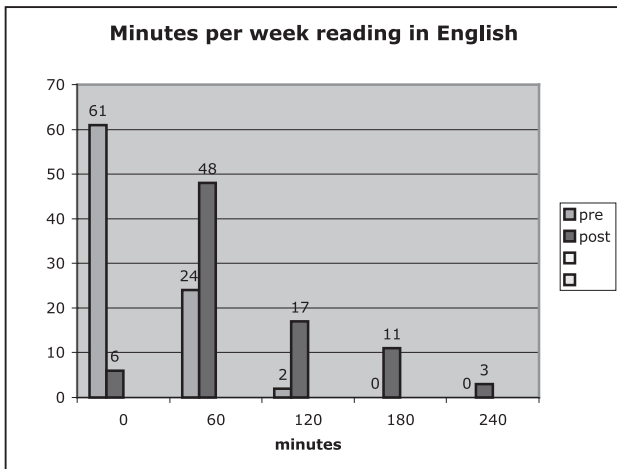
from classes which were conducted differently, all participants shared one common feature which is the foundation of ER, that is, reading in volume at an appropriate level. Some used only graded readers while others sometimes read newspapers and still others used SRA reading lab materials in addition to graded readers. Since this report does not deal directly with measured improvements in language acquisition and ability, the differences in class styles may only marginally effect post course answers. The most likely area where class style may be an influence is in the students' attitude toward reading in a second language.

This paper addresses only the responses that focus on reading in English. The questionnaire also included inquiries into reading habits when reading in Japanese. It presents results and of student reading habits, perceived gains in skill areas, strategies employed by students when reading in English, and inferences based on these findings.

Habits

The questions related to learners' reading habits were designed to determine how much time learners spent reading in English each week and how this differed before and after reading in volume. In addition, information garnered about the types of materials read and the genres preferred could be of use when preparing for future classes and purchasing new reading material.

Chart 1



Predictably there was a significant difference between the pre and post results for the time spent reading in English. Before the ER class began 68.5 % spent no time whatsoever reading in English, 26.9 % read for a hour or less, 2 % read for between one and two hours, and the remaining 2.6 % read for more than two hours a week.

In examining learners reading material preferences no significant change from pre to post administration was found, with the exception of novels. Before the classes began 24 % said they read novels in English but this figure increased to 80 % by the end of the course. This change is likely due to the fact that the majority of graded readers available are novels or novelizations. Another factor that may have contributed to the increase is that for many first year students it was their earliest opportunity to read material other than short pieces found in EFL texts.

Table 1

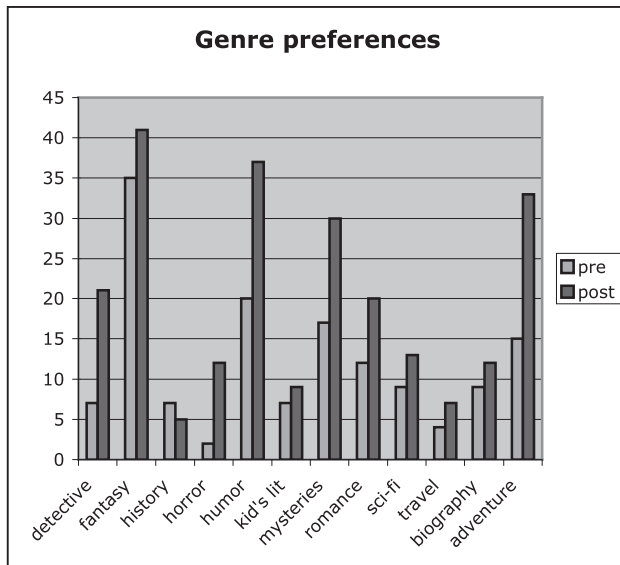
	newspapers	magazines	comics	novels	non-fiction	journals
pre	7	9	2	21	6	6
post	7	10	3	72	9	6

It was somewhat surprising that students did not make more use of new mediums for reading considering that they all were raised in the digital age. Only 3 % (pre) and 5.6 % (post) stated that they used iPods to read. Cell phones were used for reading by 9 % (pre) and 11 % (post) and interestingly the percentage of students who read online dropped from 35 % (pre) to 31 % (post).

In order to understand what kinds of books students were reading a list of 12 genres was provided along with a place for an open answer. At the end of the course all genres had an increase in the number of students who chose them. Detective, humor, mystery and adventure stories gained the most readers. With the exception of humor, the increase may be due to the types of graded readers available as many of them are mysteries, adventure and detective stories. This data does indicate that students were reading new types of books and is encouraging as it can only broaden their background knowledge base for future reading. This expansion of background knowledge should aid in word recognition, compre-

hension and fluency. In their book *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*, Day and Bamford provide criteria to determine the effectiveness of ER programs and the improvement of word recognition is one measure listed. The variety of genres read also indicates more confidence and motivation on the part of readers as they venture into new reading territory.

Chart 2



Reasons why EFL learners do not read more in English was also addressed in the questionnaire. Four demotivating factors were provided and participants could list as many as applied. Previous research (2, 6, 10) has found “no time” as the primary reason among university students for not reading and these results here were no different as 46 % cited lack of time in the first class. The number increased to 67 % by the last class. There are many possible explanations for this including increased work in all classes as the semester progressed, participation in clubs and part-time employment to name a few. “No time” as a reason for not reading more could be a misconception on the students’ part. Their perceived lack of time may be a result of poor time management, misplaced priorities, and difficulty adapting to their new university lifestyle.

Those citing “lack of material” as a reason for not reading in English dropped from 24 % to 21 %. That one in five still found it difficult to locate suitable

reading material appears contradictory as the classes provided reading material and the campus library, local bookstores and the Internet were all available as additional resources. Those who gave “no interest” as an answer increased from 6 % to 7 %. The reason most cited after lack of time was “too difficult” to read in English. Before ER 30 % listed this as a reason, but after the course this figure fell to only 12 %, a significant change. This indicates that the ER had a very positive effect on individual student’s confidence and improved reading ability. It is also an indication that the classes provided, and students were able to choose, material of an appropriate level.

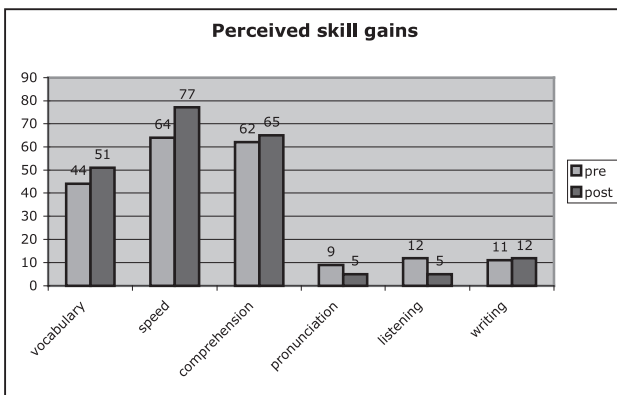
Perceptions

The next part of the questionnaire to be considered is that dealing with learner perceptions. To the question, “Do you think that reading in English will help (is helping) you English ability?” all participants answered yes on both pre and post questionnaires. In the post questionnaire the question, “Do you think your attitude toward reading has changed as a result of this class?” elicited 13 “no” responses, but due to the poorly worded question it is difficult to say if most had a more positive outlook toward reading in English or not. Among those who answered “no” were two who read for more than three hours a week so it is likely they had a positive attitude coming into the class and it did not change.

Student perceptions of which language skills would improve from reading provided interesting results. Prior to the course 49 % anticipated gains in vocabulary acquisition. After the course this figure increased to 65 %. At the outset 72 % foresaw increased reading speed as a result of ER. At the end of the course this figure rose to 87 %. While 70 % thought their comprehension would improve as a result of ER, after ER 81 % thought they had improved in this area. A skill often associated with improvement due to more reading is writing (7, 8, 9). Interestingly only 12 % anticipated any improvement in writing due to reading more and the figure increased by only 1 % by the end of the course. This may be due to the fact that most of those in the study do not write often or in any volume in English and that a longer time spent reading extensively is needed

to notice improvement in this area. Only 13% expected their listening to improve and only 6% believe that it did as a result of reading. The percentage of those who felt their pronunciation would improve dropped from 13% to 6%. The perceived gains in speed, vocabulary, and comprehension were higher than those of university students identified by Takase (15) while those for listening and writing were lower.

Chart 3



Strategies

The final items to be considered are those concerning the use of strategies when reading and preparing to read. In total 11 items were identified in two separate questions. Goals for a successful ER program include the ability of the reader to “successfully guess new words from context” (16), to stop reading when the material is too difficult or not interesting, limit dictionary use as it impedes speed and fluency, and to be satisfied with less than 100% understanding of the text (4).

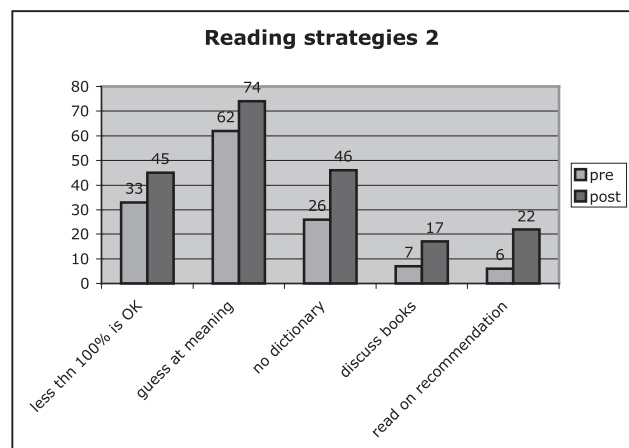
The use of dictionaries when reading was examined through responses to three statements, “I read without using a dictionary.”, “I stop to look up the meaning of all new words.”, and “I stop to look up the meaning of all new words if I see them more than once.” In replying to the first statement 29% (pre) and 52% (post) stated they did not use a dictionary. It may be inferred that as readers grew more confident and their word recognition improved they were able to get meaning from the text without a diction-

ary. Initially 17% said they looked up the meaning of all new words, but after ER only 4% continued to rely heavily on a dictionary. Similar outcomes were noted for those who looked up a new word only after more than one encounter with it as 37% (pre) and 21% (post) adopted this strategy. These are encouraging outcomes since over-reliance on dictionaries interrupts reading fluency, decreases reading speed and is demotivating for students as they lose interest in the story and need to reread passages when stopping too often.

In a linked inquiry 70% (pre) and 83% (post) stated that they guessed at the meaning of new words. The figures for those who guessed at the meaning of new words or ideas was 68% (pre) and 61% (post). Guessing at meaning from context and lexical clues is an important strategy used by fluent readers and these answers indicate that the participating ER students were more comfortable employing this strategy as the course progressed. Another sign of heightened confidence among readers was the increase from 37% to 51% of those who were satisfied with less than 100% understanding of the text.

Those who discussed what they read with classmates doubled from 8% (pre) to 19% (post). This indicates that they enjoyed reading and were taking part in an activity that is common among fluent readers. Similarly the rise from 7% (pre) to 25% (post) of those who read books based on recommendations of classmates shows that these readers were engaged, motivated and again behaving in a manner associated with fluent readers.

Chart 4



The strategy of stopping if the material is not interesting was used by 25 % (pre) and 31 % (post). Those who stopped because they found the material to be too difficult decreased from 18 % to 17 %. This is actually a good figure as it indicates that the vast majority were probably reading at an appropriate level and not reading books they found to be too difficult.

Conclusion

The data collected from this research shows those students' habits and use of strategies improved with the intervention of ER. Flaws were found in design of the instrument. These need to be corrected in order to produce more accurate answers before this questionnaire can be used again. If possible, it would be of interest to obtain student reasons as to why they chose certain reading materials over others. There was an open question at the end of the survey asking why and how student attitudes toward reading in English have changed. In general those who responded to this question stated that they no longer viewed reading as difficult and that they now had a purpose to read. They also shared the belief that reading could be fun. The detailed results of that question and the data regarding reading in Japanese will be discussed in a future article.

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Appendix 1: (post questionnaire)

Reading and You

faculty: _____

date: ____/____/____

school year: 1 2 3 4

Student Number: _____

1. Is this a compulsory or an elective course?
Elective () Compulsory ()
2. How much time do you think you spend reading in an average week?
In Japanese? _____ hours In English? _____ hours
3. What kinds of things do you usually read in Japanese? (check any that apply)
newspapers () magazines () comics () novels ()
non-fiction () research journals () other () _____
4. What kinds of things do you usually read in English? (check any that apply)
newspapers () magazines () comics () novels ()
non-fiction () research journals () other () _____
5. What kind of books do you enjoy reading in English? (check any that apply)
biography () mystery () romance () humor ()
fantasy () adventure () SF () travel ()
kid's literature () history () horror () detective ()
other () _____
6. Do you think that reading in English is helping your English ability?
yes no
7. In what skill areas do you think your English ability has improved as a result of your reading in English? (check any that apply)
vocabulary () reading speed () reading comprehension ()
pronunciation () listening () writing ()
8. Do you read ... (check any that apply)
online? () with your cell phone? () on your iPod? ()
other () _____
9. What is the main reason that you do not read in English more than you do now? (check only one)
no time () not interested () can't find good things to read () difficult ()
other () _____
10. When you read in English, which of these things do you do? (check any that apply)
I stop to look up the meaning of all new words ()
I stop to look up the meaning of a new word if I see it more than once ()
I guess at the meaning of new words ()
I stop reading if the book is too difficult ()
I stop reading if the story is not interesting ()
I sometimes listen to the audio of the book I am reading ()
11. Which of these describe you and your reading? (check any that apply)
I am satisfied when I don't understand 100% of what is written ()
I guess at the meaning of new words or ideas ()
I read without using a dictionary ()
I discuss books I've read with classmates/friends ()
I read books based on recommendations of classmates ()
12. Do you think your attitude toward reading has changed because of this class?
yes () no ()

How? Why?