

Original Article

An Exploration into Students' Insights about Extensive Reading: Does ER Lead Learners to become Autonomous or Stray Readers ?

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This study was originally designed as a preliminary survey for another action research study by Sunami-Burden (2015b)¹, which examines the use of a checklist as a facilitator for reading, in order to perceive the degree of student engagement in Extensive Reading (ER) as well as their opinions of ER. Unexpectedly, this survey revealed that the students majoring in English Communication had been struggling rather than enjoying extensive reading. Nine English majors taking Reading B as an elective subject at Chugoku Junior College participated in this study. The participants completed an open and closed-item questionnaire on the first day of the second semester, which sought their insights into extensive reading. Results showed that extensive reading apparently had helped remove the learners' antipathy towards reading in English, but the students lacked awareness of the principles of extensive reading, and did not know the methodology of effective extensive reading. Mizuno (2010)², argues that the significance of teaching reading in tertiary education is to lead students to become autonomous readers, who are able to choose a book to read and learn from reading on their own. The participants in this study, however, seems to have been straying into a black hole of ER, meaning that they become very confused. It is most likely that the students are simply doing extensive reading to fulfill the requirements for getting a grade in the same way as Robb's (2002)³ students were. The paper concludes with the argument that learners need teachers' responsive guidance and explicit assistance in extensive reading.

Key Words: Extensive Reading, Teacher's Guidance, Teacher's Roles, Autonomous Readers, Stray Readers

Introduction

Sunami-Burden (2014a)⁴ and (2014b)⁵ suggested that cooperative learning, and the use of pair work in reading had an affective function of arousing the learners' reading potential although it was unclear whether it had helped them improve their reading comprehension. At the Department of English Communication at Chugoku Junior College (CJC, hereafter), reading is taught through two different

courses: one is compulsory for the first-year new intake, called Reading A, which takes place in the first semester, in which intensive reading is mainly targeted. This is followed by an elective course, Reading B, in the second semester, in which speed reading including skimming and scanning is introduced.

Although Reading A was favorably recognized by most of the learners (Sunami-Burden, 2014a⁴; 2014b⁵), it turned out that Reading B in the second semester in 2013 was not a satisfactory course for some of them. After the researcher casually talked with one of the students in 2014 when the new school year started, the student revealed that she had not been fond of Reading B because she had been

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confused over the skills of skimming and scanning readings. Also, other students mentioned that they found Reading B an enjoyable subject because they had learned the subject in the cooperation with other students, but that they did not think their reading comprehension had improved and they still had little idea how to solve questions in the reading section of both EIKEN and TOEIC. Apart from two Reading classes in the two semesters, where they were instructed in intensive reading and necessary reading strategies, they had been engaged in extensive reading for the whole year. It was assumed that learners had acquired reading skills and done a certain amount of reading. Student comments were a surprise to this researcher and encouraged further exploration into offering students reading guidance, as is argued in Sunami-Burden (2015b)¹⁾.

In the second semester in 2014, prior to the study, the author wished to understand how reading, especially extensive reading, was received by the learners as Reading B includes extensive reading as well as skimming and scanning skills.

Unexpectedly, learners' responses were rather more reflective than had been expected. In this paper the author illustrates the principles and the suggestive use of extensive reading based on learner insights and experiences.

Extensive reading at CJC

Extensive reading has been one of the activities involved in Oral English at CJC since it had been introduced in 2000 (Lemmer, 2012)⁶⁾. It was revealed that extensive reading helped the learners' comprehension and test scores improve and ER was favorably recognized by the students (Lemmer, 2006)⁷⁾.

Other teachers have also been successful in introducing extensive reading in Oral English. Here, the students are required to select and read graded readers provided in the library at a certain frequency outside the classroom and submit 'Book Reports'. This submission accounts for thirty percent of their semester final grades. As Oral English is a compulsory subject for all the students majoring in English Communication at CJC throughout their two years, the students, therefore, have opportunities to read numerous books. Thus, the approach taken at

CJC is likely to satisfy one of the principles offered by Day and Bamford (2002)⁸⁾, whereby 'learners read as much as possible' (p. 138).

According to Day and Bamford (1998⁹⁾, 2002⁸⁾, teachers should consider ten principles for teaching extensive reading as a tool for professional development and can be summarized thus:

1. The teaching material is easy;
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available;
3. Learners choose what they want to read;
4. Learners read as much as possible;
5. The purpose of reading should be for pleasure, to gain information and general understanding;
6. Reading has its own reward;
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower;
8. Reading is individual and silent;
9. Teachers orient and guide their students;
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

It is most likely that the first four principles were fulfilled at CJC as mentioned earlier. Whether or not the remaining six principles were satisfied, however, has not been fully explored yet not only at the institution but in the literature as Yoshizawa, Takase, and Otsuki (2013)¹⁰⁾ argue. Hopefully, such an exploration might shed some light on why students are struggling in reading.

The Study

1. Participants

The participants of this study were 9 female first year students in the English Department of CJC in 2014, taking 'Reading B' as an elective subject. The class met twice a week for a single semester of 15 weeks.

2. Questionnaire

In order to understand how extensive reading has been received among students in the department of English Communication, I conducted a quantitative and qualitative survey (Appendix 1) on the very first day of the class, asking the first year students taking Reading B how they conduct ER and about their feelings towards extensive reading. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire anonymously, and it was clearly stated on the questionnaire that their responses would only be used

for research purposes and would not impact in any way on their final grades.

The first half of the questionnaire consists of seven 5-point Likert scaled questions, while the latter part of the questionnaire consists of six open-ended questions which sought their honest opinions about extensive reading and also provided free space for additional comments.

Findings

1. Quantitative data

Due to the small sample size of only nine students, only the mean score of responses are presented in Table 1 alongside their individual answers so that the reader can easily gain an overview of students' insights towards extensive reading. For the purpose of analysis, the responses to "5" (Most Positive) and "4" (Positive) were added together to create an overall score of agreement with the item, and the sum of responses to "2" (Negative) and "1" (Most Negative) were similarly calculated to gain a measure of disagreement.

In Question 1 inquired into their reading speed, five out of nine believe their reading speed is slow with a mean of 2.44.

Question 2, asked whether the learners use dictionaries to look up the meanings of unknown words encountered while reading and three responded that they always checked the meanings of the words in

dictionaries.

Question 3 asked whether the learners mind-translate the text into Japanese. Only one student answered that she always did, while another two chose "2". Those participants might believe that reading is equivalent to translating because they had been taught in the traditional Grammar-Translation method for the last six years. It is most likely that a habit is very difficult to get rid of once it is formed.

Questions 4 to 7 asked their affective and psychological insights towards extensive reading. In Question 4 one of the participants answered that she always got frustrated while reading because she did not understand the content.

Question 5 had a comparatively high mean score of 3.11. The reason why is most likely that the participants have to hand their book reports to the teacher so they have time constraints to change the book to another to read.

Question 6 is a straightforward question asking whether they are fond of extensive reading. Perhaps surprisingly, more than half of those chose "2" while only one chose "5" which indicates that extensive reading is not their favorite activity for the majority of the participants. The author is very much concerned the participants might lose their interest in not only extensive reading also reading itself albeit ER was originally employed in order to heighten students' interest in reading.

The last question in the quantitative section

Table 1 The results of the questionnaires

	(persons)					n=9
	5	4	3	2	1	M
1. Reading speed	0	1	3	4	1	2.44
2. Usage of bilingual dictionaries	0	3	3	0	3	2.66
3. Mind-translation	2	1	2	3	1	3.00
4. Frustration during reading	0	2	6	0	1	3.00
5. Giving up halfway	0	3	4	2	0	3.11
6. Fondness of Extensive Reading	1	0	3	5	0	2.44
7. Awareness of ER methodology	0	1	4	2	2	2.44

Note: 5=Most positive, 4=Positive, 3=Neutral, 2=Negative, 1=Most negative

revealed that some of the students had no idea how extensive reading should be done as four respondents chose either “1” or “2” which shows that the participants were not well oriented the methodology, or that they were not fully aware of the procedure explained by the instructor because it was demonstrated in English at the very early stage of the course, or that they simply forgot ER tips explained.

2. Qualitative data

Question 1 asks the number of books the participants have read as extensive reading materials in the last six months. As they did not remember the exact number they had read because their submitted book reports had not been returned and because they had not made any notes, estimates varied from 10 to 25.

Question 2, which asked the time spent for reading a single book, also only garnered vague answers for the same reasons as outlined above, but the shortest time spent was forty-five minutes, while the longest was a whole day.

Question 3 asked the learners to outline which genre they chose, and romance stories were the most popular followed by biographies. This was perhaps predictable based on the student population, being young women in their late teens.

Question 4 inquired into the skills used when tackling unknown words in texts, and six students responded that they inferred the contextual meanings. Three out of the above six stated that they looked up the meanings of those words in the dictionaries if they could not infer the meanings, while one of the six remarked that she looked up unknown words in the dictionary to check whether she could infer the meanings correctly. The remaining three students declared that they used their dictionaries. One of the three mentioned that she used her dictionary because she got annoyed with the quantity of unknown words.

Question 5 inquired whether they had felt any differences in their ability towards ER and two out of the nine were doubtful that any difference had occurred. The remaining seven, however, felt that their resistances to reading books written in English had reduced remarkably. One of those said:

- I feel I am able to read the text faster and my reading comprehension has improved more than before.

Another one said:

- I have got a wider vocabulary.

While a third mentioned:

- I feel like I have become to be able to read English books.

These students' comments follow 'The extensive reading bookstrap hypothesis' presented by Day and Bamford (1998)⁹⁾, which explains "Students' initial successful experiences in extensive reading result in the discovery that they can read in the second language and that it is rewarding and pleasurable" (p. 30).

The final Question sought learners' honest opinions about extensive reading. Five students confessed that they were unwilling to participate and found ER "painful" although they felt a sense of achievement after completing a book. Two students wished for a wider selection of choice than is currently available to reflect topics of interest.

In the free space provided in the questionnaire, most of the participants suggested that they wanted to read more interesting books similar to the responses in the last question, number 6, above. According to Sakai & Kanda (2005)¹¹⁾, such learners' requests about the content are good signs, indicating that they have their own desires of what they read (p. 63). Williams (1986)¹²⁾ illustrated that one of his top ten principles for teaching foreign language reading was that "In the absence of interesting texts, very little is possible" (p. 42).

Two students' comments, in contrast, surprised the author as they suggested that in a different class, a compulsory class, all of the first year English majors had to extensive reading material at a certain frequency, and had to summarize the text either in Japanese or English, and submit the report as one of the assignments. They were told by the instructor that they should not choose the same book as they had previously read in Oral English. They mentioned that they felt overloaded as well as annoyed by such assignments. The author was supposed to give the students assignments of extensive reading, but had to give up doing so, as the author did not want the students to become to dislike reading due to being overloaded by reading assignments among the three subjects.

Discussion

The participants answered the questionnaire on

the first day of the second semester, when only six months had passed since they had started extensive reading. It is, therefore, possible that extensive reading was still new to them and they simply had not become accustomed to it, or they were in the middle of seeking their own way of doing extensive reading. These might be why their answers were unpromising at the time of the survey. If the same survey had been conducted at the second semester's end six months later, the author might have received very different answers from the respondents.

According to both the open and closed questions results, many of the participants were "problematic" readers as Takase (2010)¹³⁾ describes because they translated the texts from the L2 to the L1 sentence by sentence in their heads and used their dictionaries to look up unknown words. Yoshizawa, Takase, and Otsuki (2013)¹⁰⁾ argue that it is important for the teacher to give suitable advice when they encounter problematic readers. It should be remembered that ER is an unfamiliar world of reading to most of learners who have just finished traditional Grammar-Translation learning at high school, and it might be also a new method of learning even to some English teachers. The principles and methodology of extensive reading should be fully explained to learners before introducing the approach into class activities. Even during the course, students need to be reminded of the principles and methodology repeatedly and frequently because they are apt to forget very easily. It is also proposed that English teachers in the department who are to adopt the approach in their teaching should be aware of the necessary strategies and to share a common knowledge of extensive reading.

Another role a teacher can play in extensive reading is to check reading records submitted by the students (Takase, 2010)¹³⁾. Reading records include much important information such as titles, authors, genres, and levels of books they read as well as time spent on reading. In this study, however, the participants said that they have never had their book reports returned by the course instructors. Reading records are a useful track of the learners' reading history so that they can reflect what they have read, and know how their reading speed have improved. It is strongly suggested that all the reading records submitted should be returned to students. It is also

proposed that students should be instructed to keep the records themselves after those are returned in order to avoid selecting the same book again. By checking students' book reports, on the other hand, teachers gain understanding into students' genre preference, and whether the level of books they chose is appropriate or not.

Based on information gained, for instance, teachers are able to suggest to the Administration or the library to purchase new titles that meet the students' preference. All the teachers at CJC are fortunately given a chance to purchase books good for students called 'Book Hunting Tour,' so teachers should make use of such an opportunity and select genres of books the students demanded to read.

According to Day and Bamford (1998)⁹⁾, 'the most common form of follow-up is to ask students to write in either the first or the target language, a short summary of a book-or part of the book-that they have read' (p. 142). As stated earlier, the students in this study were to summarize the text either in Japanese or English as their assignment in one subject. It is understandable that teachers, including myself, are apt to have positive proof whether students did a task or not. Asking for summaries is seemingly a more appropriate follow-up rather than translating the whole text. Day and Bamford (1998)⁹⁾ warn against summaries in their remark:

It is important to say, however, that summaries are not necessary in order to find out if a student read a book. And summaries have serious drawbacks. ... Summaries are not particularly interesting for the student to write, and they are definitely not interesting for the teacher to read. They are of absolutely no help in developing a reading community (p. 142).

Indeed the students in this study felt overloaded by such a task and frustrated as it took a long time to summarize. In addition, it was revealed later by the students that they needed to orally present the summaries to their classmates in the classroom. The author is concerned whether the students might focus on writing rather than reading. While such tasks can be a good practice of writing or speaking English for learners, it is against the principles of ER which aims 'to get students reading in the second language and liking it' (p. 6) (Day and Bamford, 1998)⁹⁾. It is fairly understandable for teachers to

include extensive reading in other classes of English except reading (as Krashen, 1993¹⁴ mentions) because reading is a powerful means of developing not only reading comprehension but also other skills such as vocabulary. It is suggested that teachers should detach extensive reading from other old-fashioned reading approaches and teachers should be reminded that extensive reading is introduced in teaching for the learners' benefit and inappropriate tasks should not be used to seek verification that their students actually read a book.

In order to avoid burdening learners with fruitless tasks, teachers need rid themselves of traditional perceptions of teaching reading and to introduce extensive reading after ascertaining that the learners fully comprehend the rationale and principles of ER.

Conclusion

To conclude, it should be remembered that the author sought insight into learner perceptions of ER and the results should not be taken as criticism of other instructors' teaching methods. Instead, the author wishes to shed light on the necessity of understanding the fundamental aims and effective use of ER in the language classroom, and the need to share the common knowledge of extensive reading among all the teachers who employ this approach in teaching.

ER is designed to create autonomous readers, who gradually habitualize reading a book outside the classroom, experience 'reading for pleasure,' and discover the significance of reading (Mizuno, 2010)². If ER causes a counter-effect on learners, they will become 'stray readers', who have antipathy to reading itself, and will believe reading is a bothersome activity.

While the questionnaire in this study shows very interesting results, the study is limited by the small sample size and findings are not generalizable across the whole English department as Reading B is an

elective class. Therefore the study warrants further administration among the wider student population. As a follow-up study, the author will explore how learner attitudes towards ER have changed upon completion of the semester (Sunami-Burden, 2015b)¹.

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Student Survey about Reading prior to Reading B

This survey is to find out how you have been engaged in 'extensive reading', one of the important elements involved in Oral English, for the last six months and how you honestly feel about it. Your answers are confidential and will only be used as research findings for academic purposes and will not impact in any way on your final grades.

Part 1: Quantitative Survey

Directions: Please state your degree of agreement or disagreement with the following questions. Circle the appropriate number.

1. Rate your reading speed yourself.

Very fast	5	4	3	2	1	Very slow
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2. Do you look up an unknown word in your dictionary?

Never do	5	4	3	2	1	Always do
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3. Do you translate the text from English to Japanese in your head while reading?

Never do	5	4	3	2	1	Always do
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4. Do you ever get annoyed because you do not understand the story?

Never do	5	4	3	2	1	Always does
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5. Do you ever give up reading halfway?

Never do	5	4	3	2	1	Frequently do
----------	---	---	---	---	---	---------------
6. Are you fond of 'extensive reading'?

Very much	5	4	3	2	1	Not at all
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7. Are you aware of the methodology of 'extensive reading'?

Aware	5	4	3	2	1	Unaware
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Part 2: Qualitative Survey

Directions: These are open-ended questions, so please take your time and write your honest feelings.

2. How many books of graded readers have you read as assignments of Oral English for the last six months?
 ()
2. How much time did it take for you to read per book?
 ()
3. What genres of graded readers have you often read?
 Example : Fiction, Non-fiction, Love story, etc.
 ()
4. What have you done when you encounter unknown words?
 ()
5. Do you think there are any differences before and after engaging in 'extensive reading'?
 ()
6. Write your honest opinions about 'extensive reading'.
 ()

Any additional comments about 'extensive reading':
