

Extensive Reading: Can Its Impact Be Measured?

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Introduction:

Extensive reading is generally considered to be reading for pleasure, reading self-selected material that is easy and reading in quantity. There is little or no testing given after the reading has been completed. This, while not in conflict with, is quite different from the intensive reading which is done in most second language reading classes. The formalization of extensive reading as a teaching tool for second language learners can be traced to Harold Plamer and others (1925) but has been recently receiving widespread attention and acceptance in Japan due to the diligent work of Rob Waring (1997), Julian Bumford (1997), Thomas Robb(1998), and Marc Helgesen (1997).

Extensive reading is one approach to learning a second language, which is highly compatible with the theory of "massive comprehensible input" as espoused by Krashen (1982). In order to improve reading fluency it is necessary to read large amounts of material in the target language. One common hindrance to accomplishing this is the lack of vocabulary recognition on the part of the learner and the interference in reading fluency caused by the learner stopping at each new word and opening the dictionary to check its meaning. Theoretically, comprehensible input is essential to the success of any extensive reading program. With this in mind, the (2000-2001) program for first year English majors at Chugoku Junior College used graded readers along with videos and audiocassettes to accompany many of the books. An additional advantage to using graded readers is that the learner meets the new vocabulary many times throughout the story.

Method:

Subjects—The subjects consisted of 12 low-intermediate level first year English majors and 12 beginner level first year English majors (n=24).

Instrument—(Starting Level Guide for Mark II Reading Laboratory 2b test. This test consists of two reading sections. The first being easier and shorter than the second. There were 5 multiple choice comprehension questions for the first reading and 6 for the second.)

Procedures—Two first year classes were assigned the reading of a minimum of 500 pages in English within one semester. All reading was done outside of the classroom. Brief forms were filled out after reading each book. These were kept simple and could be completed within 15 minutes. Before starting the students were given samples of the various levels found in the graded readers and then assigned an appropriate level. There were a total of six levels. Most students began in one of the three lowest levels. Students were free to select any of the over 600 graded readers in the school library but were restricted to the level assigned unless they had permission from the instructor to try a more difficult level. If they did not like a book or found it too difficult they could stop that book at any time and start another, using the number of pages read toward their goal of 500. Students were instructed not to use a dictionary when they encountered new words but to continue reading. If after they had read a few more pages and still could not grasp the meaning from the context they could check the dictionary.

Administration—The tests were administered in the second class of the semester and then again in the last class of the semester. Students were given 7 minutes to read and answer the questions concerning each reading. The results of the first test were measured against those of the second test.

Research Question:

The purpose of the testing and extensive reading was to determine whether or not there was a significant correlation between improved scores on the test and the extensive reading done by the students.

Results:

Before the reading began, all students were given the Starting Level Guide for Mark II Reading Laboratory 2b test. This was done to check their reading speed and comprehension. They were given the same test at the end of the semester under the same time constraints.

Table One. Descriptive Statistics

	N	X	SD
Pre-test	24	4.0000	1.9494
Post-test	24	5.5238	2.6004

Because of the relatively low number of subjects and the fact that the data was not distributed normally, the non-parametric Wilcoxon Ranked Sums procedure was chosen to further analyze the data. The procedure yielded a W of -142.00, which was significant at the .0038 level. In other words, the difference between the pre and post-test scores was highly significant. See Figure One for a graphical display.

Of the 24 students participating, all but 2 performed better the on second test date. Most higher level students increased their scores by smaller margins than the lower level students. Two tripled the first test score. Not surprisingly, the higher level group improved more dramatically than the lower level group.

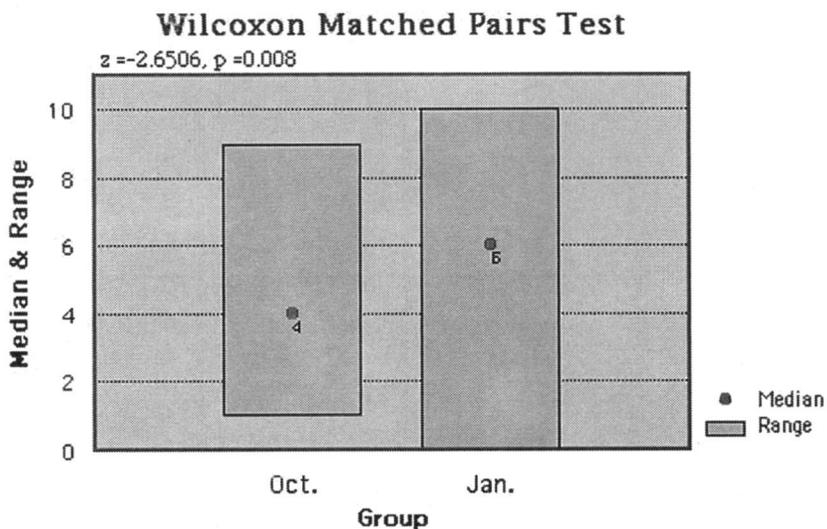


Figure One. A Graphical Data Representation

While this data could be used to try and validate how effective the extensive reading work was, it was found there are far too many external and uncontrollable factors at work to prove this point. There may have been some bias in administering the same test after only 4 months but most of the students had forgotten that they took the initial test.

Discussion:

Students attended intensive reading and speed reading classes along with oral English classes, grammar and listening and phonetics classes. The result of their work in those classes could be too large a factor in their improvement on the reading test to state that the higher scores were attributable solely to the extensive reading. There is much anecdotal evidence, however, to warrant the continuation and expansion of this program.

Some students became interested in certain authors and wish to read more of their writings. Others thought that a certain book had a real impact upon them personally. The preconceptions I had about the type of books different students would choose and enjoy were mostly erroneous. Books about the lives of Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King were among their favorites. Students encouraged their friends to read books, which they had found interesting. Many talked of the discrepancies between the graded readers and the films of the same title.

What is very significant is that nearly all the students were enjoying reading in English and for all but two it was the first time in their lives that they had read any book in English. One of the more prolific readers (over 700 pages) stated that she had hated reading, even in Japanese, before this course but now is determined to read in English everyday.

Some of the intended goals were to get students to begin to read in chunks rather than reading individual words, to think in terms of the overall meaning of the material rather than the meaning of individual words or sentences, to encourage the learner to infer the meaning of new words as they are encountered and to build overall reading fluency in the second language. An unstated goal was to have these first year students take some individual responsibility for their own learning by doing all of the work outside of class, making their own decisions about which books to read and maintaining an ongoing log of the book, author, number of pages read as well as the start and completion dates for each selection.

Conclusion:

There is no doubt in the writer's mind that the extensive reading was highly beneficial for the learners. There are, however, too many external influences, which may have contributed to the improvement of the learners' reading skills to be able to state clearly that their heightened skills are purely a result of the extensive reading. Both the learners and myself were encouraged by the sharp improvement in such a short time period.

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