

Extensive Reading: Student Perceived Benefits and Getting Students to Read More

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1 Introduction and definition of terms

The term *extensive reading* (ER) was said to have been coined by Harold Palmer (1921/1964, p. 111) to mean reading “rapidly, book after book and with a focus on the meaning and not the language of the text”. Palmer contended for the need for language learners to be able to enjoy reading large volumes of text for the real–world purposes of gaining information and pleasure from reading. Importantly, the level of the text needs to be slightly easier than the learner’s ability in order for language acquisition to take place. Samuels (1994, p. 834) refers to this level as “*i minus 1*” whereby *i* refers to the learner’s current level of acquisition. It is said that by having students choose reading material that is easy for them results in improvements in reading fluency and sight vocabulary development (Nation, 1997). One of the main assumptions underlying an ER program is that students will benefit from large amounts of comprehensible input outside of the language classroom whilst making advances affectively.

In contrast, *intensive reading* (IR) concerns itself with language learning and is deemed to be using reading in order to study vocabulary and grammatical structures. Undoubtedly, the predominant approach

taken to language learning in Japan is the use of IR strategies. With regards to teaching approaches, IR in its most extreme form manifests itself in the translation method. Most educators agree that both, ER and IR strategies can be beneficial to learners, and as such, learners should have the opportunity to acquire and learn English according to the respective approaches.

Day and Bamford (1998, p. 5) attest that two important characteristics of an effective ER program are self-selection of readers and no follow-up activities. This, they claim, maintains an emphasis on student autonomy, developing good reading habits and enhancing intrinsic motivation towards reading. One study conducted by Mason (1994) substantiates this pedagogical procedure whereby it was deemed that no significantly greater language gains were attained by groups who were asked to write book summaries, with or without teacher feedback. Mason (2005) even contests that “an excessive amount of speaking and writing actually detracts from students’ ability to speak and write.”

At a pedagogical level, a common debate arises—by having no follow-up activities it could be construed by teachers and their employers that by simply having students read copious amounts of text and not be required to demonstrate their understanding, little learning is taking place, or at best, unknown. The contrary position is that the primary importance is for having students improve their reading fluency and to foster pleasure in their reading first.

The claimed benefits of an ER program include: reading fluency, vocabulary, writing, spelling, motivation, and even oral proficiency. (see Cho & Krashen, 1994; Lai, 1993; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Robb & Susser, 1989). There is however a need for caution as to how empirically sound researchers claim their findings to be. By the very nature of experiments involving control groups, performance results for groups re-

ceiving massive amounts of input predictably always perform better. Reliability issues also arise whereby control groups are not exposed to the target vocabulary specific to any given test. Furthermore, it is very difficult to account for contamination by the very nature of subjects being enrolled in an educational institution, i.e. it would be very unlikely that many students would only be taking one language class at any given time. These factors account for the limited amount of good research that is available on the effectiveness of ER.

Some studies have investigated learners' views towards ER in an attempt to identify good teaching and learning outcomes. The perceived advantages and disadvantages of ER by 74 Japanese university students were investigated by Apple (2007) through coding the reactions of an open-response questionnaire. Despite the fact that learners perceived the linguistic benefits of ER, the main disadvantages were that ER was still seen as homework and required too much out of class time. Student preferences in reading activities were also investigated by Enbody (2005) by means of a survey of 122 participants who were required to continue reading extensively between semesters. Interestingly, only 35% of students said that they continued to read during the break calling for more support and structure if students are going to continue reading independently. In response to the reading activities during the semester, none of the four in-class activities proved to be conclusively 'enjoyable', but those activities whereby students wrote summaries of their own choosing fared better than teacher-directed comprehension or summary-type activities.

One recurring difficulty that researchers and practitioners have is deciding how much reading needs to be done to be called 'extensive reading' as opposed to 'using graded readers'. It is commonly suggested that a minimum of at least a book a week is set (Nation & Wang, 1999),

while others prescribe for 500 pages or 15 books as a target for an ER program (Helgeson, 1991). Susser and Robb (1990) diffuse the debate somewhat by insisting that extensive needs to be a relative term according to the program. Further, the current level of students' ability and motivation is of primary concern. If the class is a required course and a particular student has little or no prior reading for pleasure experiences and does not have positive views of English language learning per se, but through the course of reading a number of books at his or her own pace, this could be conceived as being extensive.

As part of ongoing reflexive practice, the researcher endeavored to firstly investigate learners' attitudes towards ER in general as well as student-held perceptions on three specific follow-up activities in the program including double-entry reading journals, vocabulary notebooks and storyboard poster presentations. As such, a combined approach was taken whereby students were asked to read as many books as possible during the semester, but instructed that they need not do follow-up activities with every book they read. Rather, they could choose which books they would like to use for follow-up activities maintaining a target of 500 pages at any level for the semester.

2 Implementation

According to the goals of a first year one-semester Study Skills class, it was decided to utilize graded readers in the program. Three classes were involved in the study at a Tokyo women's university from three different departments: Department of English Communication—14 students, also taking speaking/writing classes conducted in English at least twice per week; Department of International Social Studies (IS) — 14 students, possibly taking foreign language classes other than English; and, the Department of Human Life and Environment Studies

(HE) —16 students. The levels of the students varied somewhat but could be generally described as high–beginner to low intermediate.

Despite the number of students being relatively small, it was beneficial for investigating the perceptions of all the participants and to be able to make changes for improving the implementation of ER in future courses.

Students were introduced to the concept of what ER is and how to do it in the first class of the semester. They were taken to the library and shown how to select books at or below their current level and instructed that: they should not be concerned if there are a few words that they don't understand and to instead, continue reading; they needed to keep a count of the number of pages they had read (a printed sheet was provided to the students); they could stop and change a book at any time; and, their challenge was to read more than 500 pages over the coming 12 weeks.

Throughout the term students were also asked to do follow–up activities for some of the books that they read. These activities included: double–page entry reader journals; vocabulary lists; and, one storyboard book summary presentation. Double–page entry reader journals require the student to quote two or three parts of the book which they found interesting in any way on the left–side page of a B5 notebook. On the right–side page, students write a few sentences about their reflections on this excerpt. A minimum requirement of 1 page for each of any 3 books that they read was set. Vocabulary notebooks involved students recording at least 40 new unknown words in the back of their reading journals including parts of speech, meanings and original example sentences. The storyboard book summary presentations had students sketching their stories in six scenes on A3 paper. They then wrote scripts for checking with the instructor and practiced before presenting

with no notes in small groups The audience members took notes in pre-prepared listening books.

During the last regular class of the semester, students were asked to anonymously complete a survey (Appendix 1) which was adapted from Enbody (2005).

3 Results and discussion

Q1. How many books at each level did you read this semester?

Perhaps the primary goal of any ER program is to have students reading large numbers of books autonomously. It was indeed hoped that students could get through at least 1 book per week. Tables 1 and 2 show the amount of reading that took place.

Table 1 . Number of books read by Department

Book level	EC	HE	IS	Total
Starter	0	2	29	31
1	20	18	35	73
2	34	20	11	65
3	3	0	1	4
4	0	0	0	0
5	0	0	0	0
Other	1	0	0	1
Total	58	38	47	143

Table 2 . Summary of average books and pages read

	EC	HE	IS	Total
Av. Books read	4.1	2.7	3.4	3.4
Av. Pages read	144	95	119	119

It is evident that the quantity of reading is far less than the target set at the beginning of the semester. This is despite the fact that students were regularly given 15–20 minutes of class time to read and gradual instruction on the importance of faster reading, guessing if there were a few unknown words, changing levels if a book was too easy or difficult. The significance of the low quantity of reading occurring is that instructors can believe that whilst students are looking at books and keeping records of the titles of books they are reading, still far less than desirable input is being achieved. Certainly one can conclude that not enough reading out of class was occurring and teachers need to be able to keep a close eye on the volume of reading on a weekly basis.

Another factor is that all too often less motivated students would say that they had left their reading journals at home, or had been barred from borrowing from the library by the same number of days a book was overdue. In this case, a student’s friend would lend them a spare book for reading time but naturally continuity was compromised on such occasions. Finally, it is useful to know that most students stayed at the level 2 or below range of readers. Ideally, with increased reading speeds students should not only be aiming to read more, but also to gradually move into the higher level readers.

Figure 1 gives an indication of any affective changes that may have taken place as a result of ER.

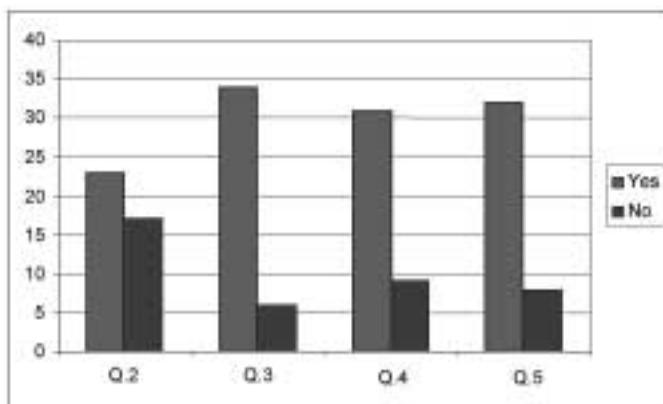


Figure 1 . Responses to Questions 2, 3, 4 & 5

With regards to Question 2, there is no clear indication either way whether or not any students will actually continue reading after the class has finished. As such, it is difficult to ascertain students' attitudes towards reading outside of class except to say that about half of the students would not mind doing it. Given the data from Question 1 however, it would seem pretty unlikely with an average of only 3.4 books being read per student.

Questions 3, 4 & 5 all dealt with learners' perceptions of the benefits of ER for language acquisition, respectively dealing with: improving language ability, understanding English grammar, and understanding new conversational expressions. These results confirm the student perceptions reported in previous studies discussed earlier that students understand that there are benefits in reading extensively in their own time [see Apple (2007), Enbody (2008)]. Again however, it is likely that the level of motivation and desire to do so is relatively low in students not yet having had regular reading habits instilled.

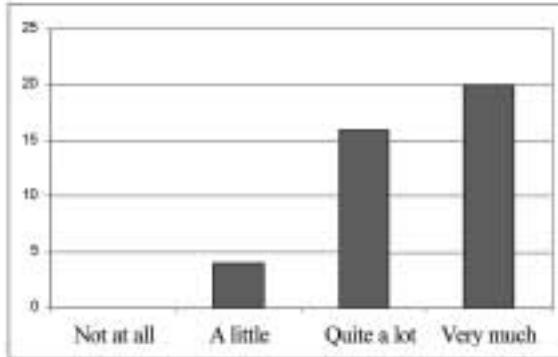


Figure 2 . Responses to Question 6. How much did you enjoy this class?

Although the survey was completed anonymously, there is always a likelihood of interference with this question due to the teacher/student social dynamic. Fortunately, no students reported that they did not enjoy the class but more importantly, there were only four students who said they enjoyed the class only a little, with the majority stating they either quite or very much enjoyed the class.

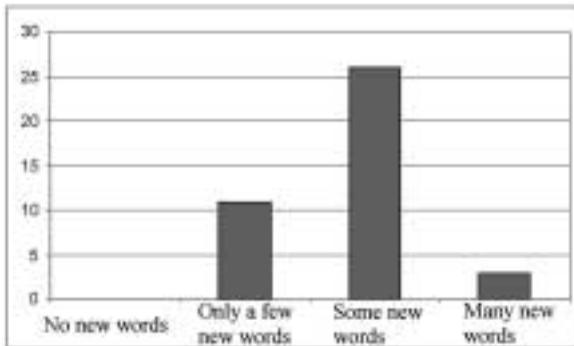


Figure 3 . Responses to Question 7. Did reading books in English help you to learn new words?

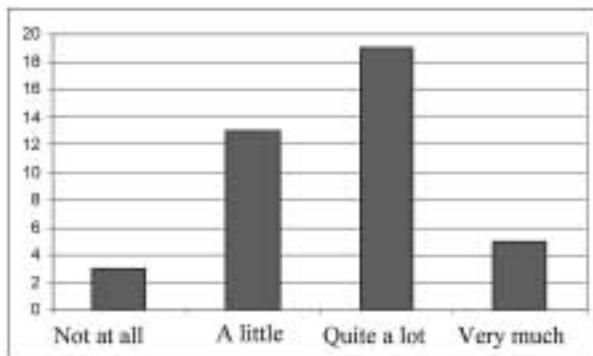


Figure 4 . Responses to Question 8. Did you enjoy giving a presentation about your book?

The results for question 7 are strongly related to the students' required task of making vocabulary lists of unknown words. Accordingly, it is difficult to know whether respondents are making their indications based on reading alone, or listing up the new words as they go. There is however a case to be made that most students felt that through their reading, some acquisition of vocabulary was achieved.

This follow-up activity rated highly popular with the majority of students. In class, students enjoyed making storyboard posters, preparing for and giving their speeches. Because the speeches were conducted in small groups many times, this helped learners to relax and enjoy presenting to their peers, and this is generally reflected in the survey results.

Questions 9, 10 & 11 were all qualitative in nature whereby students could respond freely to the items. Categories were generated by counting the number of instances similar responses were given and then tabled as follows.

Table 3 . Responses to Question 9. Please write your free comments about using readers.

Attitude	No. of responses	Example comments
Enjoyable	11	– I could enjoy reading English books. – I enjoyed reading books, I can get pleasure.
Useful	11	– I have not ever [never] read English books. So it is useful for me to improve my English skills.
Hard	5	– At first it is difficult for me to read readers, but now it is easier than before. – I challenged level 2 but very difficult.
Not enjoyable	2	– Reading books are a little interesting but to write comment[s] is not fun.
Total Responses	29	

From these results it can be concluded that students in general really enjoyed their reading and found it useful for their language acquisition. A number of students also prefaced their comments with the fact that this was their first time to read books in English and as such we can say that using graded readers is a worthwhile venture and consistent with the literature on the benefits of ER. It should also be noted that whilst students were encouraged to make some comments in response to each of the open-ended questions, a number of students declined. With regards to Question 9, 13 students declined to respond despite having time to do so. A weakness in this study is therefore made apparent that the survey was conducted in English and for better results in the future it should be done in Japanese.

Table 4 . Responses to Question10. Please write your free comments about using reader journals.

Attitude	No. of responses	Example comments
Enjoyable	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It's fun for me to write reading journals. - It's a very nice idea to write in reading journals, I could write with fun [enjoyment].
Useful	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To write nice sentences helped my English skills. - It was very useful, in a speaking class I might forget vocabulary but I was helped to speak by reading journals
Tiresome/hard	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sometimes I don't want to make journals. - I am tired- It was difficult - I challenged level 2 but very difficult.
Other	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I think I lack vocabulary- no feeling
Total Responses	24	

This question was basically answered with students clearly indicating that they liked maintaining reading journals or they did not. Indeed, the level of output with this follow-up activity was the greatest with students expected to write up to a couple of paragraphs in response to 4-5 books. Although students were free to choose which parts of the book they wanted to quote from, and it was a free response activity, it still proved to be difficult for about half of the learners. It is therefore suggested that learner journals tend to take away too much valuable reading time and tend to overly rely on intensive reading strategies. They might therefore be at their most value with higher level learners or they run the risk of actually decreasing motivation amongst learners to read.

Table 5 . Responses to Question 11. Please write your free comments about using vocabulary notebooks.

Attitude	No. of responses	Example comments
Useful	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I wrote many new words. I want to write new words. - Vocabulary notebooks are good. I remember English.
Difficult but useful	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very difficult but benefit for me. - I researched English words by using [an] English dictionary. It was difficult but a nice experience.
Tiresome/hard	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficult. It's hard to [for] me. - It was difficult
Other	5	
Total Responses	27	

Whilst this task was deemed to be difficult by many respondents, the majority of indications were that the task was beneficial. Perhaps students found the vocabulary notebooks to be a manageable activity because it could be done in shorter time segments than the reading journal task. Furthermore, immediate knowledge of performance is gained when students complete an example sentence for each new word. Many smaller, yet frequent successes might be the reason for such a positive response, however the reasons for this surprisingly positive response are not within the scope of this study but further investigation could be seen as warranted.

4 Future recommendations and conclusion

Whilst I would concur that few output activities may be effective for focussing on maximizing input as suggested by Day & Bamford (1997) and Mason (2004), I strongly contend for a more structured, self-monitoring system than simple lists with dates, titles, number of pages etc.

Whilst minor in scope and scale, this study has shown that it is still very difficult to have students monitor their own progress outside of class time.

With regards to the follow-up activities in this study, storyboard presentations make for enjoyable in-class speaking and listening activities and vocabulary lists are perceived by learners as somewhat difficult, but an effective means for vocabulary acquisition. Double-sided reading journals were really only effective for those students who were already capable of reading quickly and therefore motivated to express their ideas in writing. The students reading less obviously found it a chore to find time to write their reflections.

As a result, this term my students have all been given electronic copies of a spreadsheet with tables and graphs already formulated for them. For one of the two classes each week, class is held in a computer-equipped room and students do reading speed checks, update the titles and number of books and pages they have read according to level, and, give an enjoyment rating.

The benefits of this approach have been immediately effective. After just 2 weeks, one class has reached a combined total of 80 books with a number of students having already read more than 5 books. On a weekly basis, students can see a colorful graph being produced by their own reckoning and they can more concretely set targets for themselves for the short term. The other benefit of course is for the teacher to be able to instantaneously gather all of the students' data through the classroom shared drive. I would therefore contend that the volume of reading that takes place can be strongly correlated with the regularity of self monitoring and enhanced when the feedback is graphed by the learners themselves. This thesis is currently under study.

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Appendix 1

Using Graded Readers Survey

Please write your honest opinion. You do not need to write your name.

1. How many books at each level did you read this semester?

Starter _____ Level 1. _____ Level 2. _____ Level 3. _____ Level 4.
other _____

2. Would you like to continue reading books in English even after this class is finished? Y N

3. Do you think reading books in English will help you improve your English language ability? Y N

4. Did reading books in English help you to understand English grammar better? Y N

5. Did reading books in English help you to understand new conversational expressions? Y N

6. How much did you enjoy this class?
not at all a little quite a lot very much

7. Did reading books in English help you to learn:
no new words only a few new words some new words
many new words

8. Did you enjoy giving a presentation about your book?
not at all a little quite a lot very much

9. Please write your free comments about using readers.

10. Please write your comments about using reader journals.

11. Please write your comments about using vocabulary notebooks.

Adapted from Enbody (2005)