

Extensive Reading Level Placement: Determining Japanese College Students' Appropriate Starting Levels

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Abstract

近年日本の大学の英語教育においても多読が盛んに実施されるようになってきた。多読では学習者が自ら自分に合った易しい本を選び楽しんで読むことで、単語認知や統語解析の自動化を推進し、また精読ではカバーしきれない読書量を確保することが期待されている。これは容易に理解できる読みを大量に行うことで顕在知識 (explicit knowledge) を手続き知識 (procedural knowledge) に変化させ、母語話者の読みのような流暢さを習得できると考えられるからだ。また流暢に読めるようになれば読書量や動機付けにも影響し、読書の「好循環」が生まれる効果が指摘されている。しかし、高校の授業や受験で難解な英語を解読してきた日本の大学生にとって「自分に合った易しい」読み物とは具体的にどのようなものなのか。既存の英語学習者用段階別読み物 (graded readers) は多くの多読授業で使用されるが、各出版社既定のレベルのうち、どこから読み始めるべきなのかはあまり客観的に明示されていない。本稿では多読のレベル判別のために作成されたテストの2015年度春学期開始時の結果を、過去の文献にある同テストの結果とともに提示し、顕在知識として難解な文章を理解できる大学生でも、易しすぎるように思われるような最低レベルから始めるべきであることを提案する。

Keywords: extensive reading, graded readers, reading fluency

Overview of extensive reading

Reading has always been an essential part of foreign language education. In many language programs, reading occupies a great deal of the curriculum. However, how the skills of reading should be taught is under a lot of discussion. Namely, in recent years, the issues of intensive reading versus extensive reading have attracted a lot of attention. Intensive reading courses often focus on teaching reading skills and strategies. Especially for intermediate learners of English, these skills and strategies include basic skills such as finding the main idea, skimming, inferencing, as well as advanced skills of schema-building and metacognitive skills. While intensive reading focuses on skills for text comprehension,

scrutinizing parts of the text takes up valuable instructional time, resulting in a lack of volume of reading. On the other hand, an extensive reading program offers the volume of reading that intensive reading may not provide.

Extensive reading attracts reading instructors' attention because of the following three reasons: a) extensive reading increases the volume of reading; b) extensive reading promotes fluent reading, and c) extensive reading motivates students to read (Kadota, Noro, & Shiki, 2010). The first two points are closely related as the large volume of reading through extensive reading creates opportunities for the learners to expose themselves to written text for a length of time. This exposure to print supports the development of fluent readers.

For fluent reading comprehension, lower level processes of reading, such as rapid and automatic word recognition, lexical access, and initial syntactic parsing, are essential (Grabe & Stoller 2002; Kadota, 2007; Ushiro, 2009). In order to pay more attention to the higher level processes of reading – discourse level analysis of the text such as schema analysis and semantic propositional formation — this decoding system of lower level reading processes needs to be automatized. Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2 illustrate Samuels' model (2006) of fluent and beginning readers. The fluent readers are paying more attention to comprehension itself and less attention to decoding because their lower level processing has already been automatized. In other words, fluent readers can focus on understanding the text without wondering about the meaning of certain words or simple grammatical features. On the other hand, beginner readers focus on decoding because their decoding skills have not yet reached the rapid speed of processing; hence, at the time of decoding, beginner readers neglect the necessary attention for comprehension or higher processes such as discourse-level analysis of schema, references, or even monitoring comprehension.

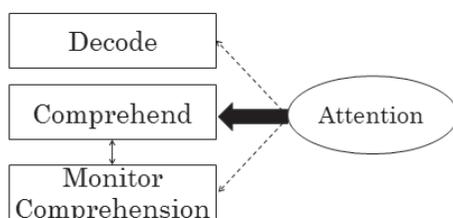


Figure 1.1. Comprehension of fluent readers.

Adapted from Samuels (2006).

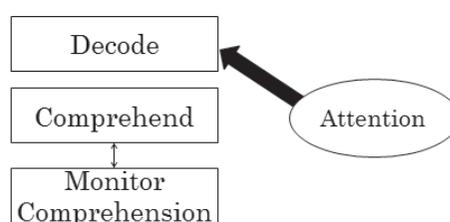


Figure 1.2. Comprehension of beginning readers.

In order to build such rapid and automatic processes of decoding text, readers require the increase of input in reading. Grabe and Stoller suggest that automatic word recognition skills “are difficult to develop without ‘exposure to print’” (2002, p.21). Automatic word recognition skill is the most fundamental requirement for reading comprehension; and, the understanding of the overall meaning of sentences, paragraphs and texts cannot be reached without the learners’ automatic word recognition. By the same token, those learning to read in English “need countless hours of exposure to print (that they are capable of comprehending successfully) if they are to develop automaticity in using information from grammatical structures to assist them in reading” (ibid, p.23).

When the volume of reading is increased, the quality of the level selection of the reading must be considered as well. Kadota (2012) defines the appropriate level of input that helps lead known (learned) explicit knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary into automatized procedural knowledge. His suggested reading level of comprehension ease, which is much lower than the learners’ reading level, promotes the repeated native-like processing of reading and results in the automaticity of the lower level processes of reading. In addition, Takase (2010) explains this automaticity building process as “warm-up” or “muscle building” (p.71) training which many sports require of players to do outside of games.

This easy, or what sometimes appears to be too easy, comprehensible input can often be obtained from “leveled readers” or “graded readers” in most ESL and EFL settings. Because their topics, grammar, vocabulary and many other features of the text are adapted for the appropriate reading level, they act as useful resources for an extensive reading program. As learners vary in their comfortable levels of reading, they may choose their own level of readers to seek such easy readings. In recent years, Japanese university libraries have realized the importance of such readers and many have added thousands of leveled and graded readers into their collections of books.

Using leveled or graded readers, extensive reading can be practiced by learners of English to build their fluency in reading. Since the 1980s, the roles of extensive reading in EFL classrooms in Japan have gradually increased; however, this concept of “too-easy” reading has not been well accepted by many teachers of higher education. Traditionally, many Japanese teachers and learners have believed that “learning” and “studying” occurs only upon concentrated hard-work. For those believers, calling the reading of some picture-book-like easy readings “learning” is hard to imagine. Such readings may even be considered as insulting,

especially for students who have passed very challenging entrance exams with high-level English readings. Many of these teachers and learners choose more difficult reading books to implement extensive reading. With difficult reading books, the goal of extensive reading, a large amount of reading and hence the automaticity building, cannot be reached easily.

The definition of extensive reading instruction is not strictly defined, but successful extensive reading procedure can be clearly identified. Day and Bamford (2002) summarize ten characteristics of successful extensive reading programs, and one of them specifically states the importance of the reading materials being “well within the linguistic competence of the students...” (p. 8). They also point out the importance of a large quantity of reading and the students’ flexibility of a choice of books. Susser and Robb (1990) also describe extensive reading procedures as the reading of a large quantity for a global understanding and the readers’ pleasure, and they suggest that students should choose the books they want to read. In addition, many extensive reading advocates practice “the Three Laws of Extensive Reading:” 1) Do not use a dictionary, 2) Skip where it is incomprehensible, and 3) Stop reading if the book is boring (Sakai & Kanda, 2005; Furuta & Kanda, 2010; Furukawa & Ueda, 2011). Therefore, the features of extensive reading could be summarized as reading a large volume of easily understandable books of the students’ individual choices.

Furthermore, readers only learn to read by reading. In order to keep learning, learners need to keep reading. Extensive reading can create Nuttall’s virtuous circle of the good reader (1996) as in Figure 2.1, where learners will keep reading if they can enjoy reading. To enjoy reading, they must understand the text. If they keep reading, they will read faster and read more. If they read more, automaticity of their decoding skills will improve, and they can pay more attention to the comprehension, resulting in better understanding. On the other hand, too difficult texts often create a vicious circle, as shown in Figure 2.2, instead of the virtuous circle. When readers are given too difficult texts, they struggle to understand. Difficult comprehension demotivates them to read, and even when they do read, the struggle keeps them from more reading. Dysfluent reading does not support automatization, and does not help the learners to pay more attention to comprehension. Extensive reading’s most important purpose is to create this virtuous circle, not the vicious circle, and develop good and fluent readers who read a large volume of successful reading.

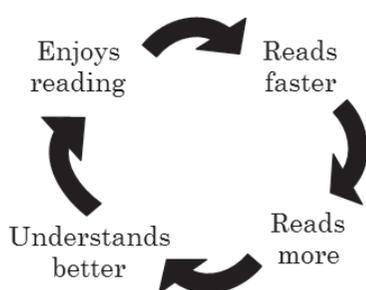


Figure 2.1. Virtuous circle of the good reader.

Adapted from Nuttall (1996).

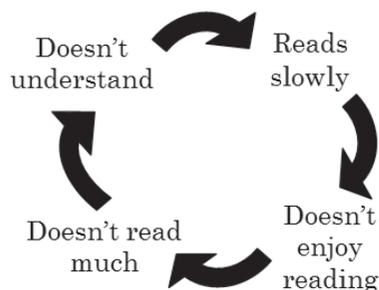


Figure 2.2. Vicious circle of the slow reader.

EPER and students' reading level

For extensive reading purposes, students should choose the level they are comfortable to read. Waring (2000) suggests no more than two or three unknown words per page for the appropriate level. However, how can the comfortable level be measured rather than simply recommended as “easy, comfortable reading”? One of the few evaluation tools available, which was developed by the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER)¹, provides a cloze test to assess each student's level of proficiency and “establish the level at which a student should enter a reading scheme organized according to EPER levels” (IALS, University of Edinburgh, Notes for Users). In other words, this modified cloze test with the filling of every six or seven words, called the EPER Progress/Placement Test (PPT), is intended to measure the level of reading, where the test taker's reading level is in accordance with the graded reader level. Although EPER PPT has faced controversy over being a cloze test for evaluating the proficiency of reading, and for not being intended for EFL learners (Yamashita 2008 covers EPER tests in details), many extensive reading researchers have used EPER PPTs to measure improvement in ability (Lemmer, 2006; Shillaw, 1999; Takase, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2012; Yamazaki, 2009; Yamashita, 2008; Yamashina, Tsurii, & Herbert, 2011; Yoshizawa, Takase, & Osuki, 2013).

EPER PPT has three parallel versions of the test, A, B, and E and can assess the student reading level into EPER levels. EPER levels and their interpretation in terms of graded readers are shown in Table 1. The unlabeled

¹For more details, see <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/english-language-teaching/courses/teacher-development/eper>.

level above EPER Level X recommends students to read unsimplified materials. The three versions of the tests allow raw scores to be converted into standardized scores for comparison. The standardized scores are then translated into levels and shows what level of graded readers (or leveled readers which are intended for L1) the students should choose. Also the Notes for Users state that EPER PPT can be used “to measure progress, e.g. at the end of a semester or a year.”

Table 1. EPER levels and their interpretations

EPER Level	Student Level	Oxford Bookworms	Penguin Readers	L1 Reading	TOEIC
X	Bridge	Stage 6	Level 6	Adults /	730
A	Advanced	Stage 5	Level 5	Unsimplified	650
B	High Intermediate	Stage 4	Level 4	Teenage Fiction (Ages 13-15)	530
C	Intermediate	Stage 3	Level 3	-	450
D	Low Intermediate	Stage 2	Level 2	Ages 1-12	300
E	Elementary	Stage 1	-	-	150
F	Beginner	Starters	Level 1	-	-
G	Starter	-	Easystarters	-	-
SC*	-	-	-	Starter Cards & Reading Cards	-

Adapted from Hill (2001), Hill (1997), and IALS University of Edinburgh (1990, 1995)

* Though the level below G is not labeled as an EPER level, the author called the level the Starter Card level (SC) because EPER describes this level with such a name in L1 Reading.

College students' reading levels in Japan

While an EPER PPT can be a useful tool for measuring levels of reading in terms of graded readers, the EPER levels' TOEIC score conversion shown in Table 1 can be quite deceiving. Considering the average TOEIC score of first year college students (IP test) was 424 in 2014 (IIBC, 2014), most Japanese college students should be able to read EPER level C, which could be interpreted as Oxford Bookworms (OBW) Stage 3. Therefore, it is easy to imagine that many teachers and students who are aware of the level of reading they have achieved before college would insist on reading intermediate level graded readers. However, as mentioned before, participants of extensive reading must read easier

level readings than they are used to. Takase (2010) warns extensive reading teachers that much easier readers are necessary especially at the beginning of extensive reading. In addition, the results of research involving EPER PPT scores reveal that many college level readers are not ready to read even the lowest level graded readers (Takase, 2007, 2008, 2012; Yamashina et al., 2011; Yoshizawa et al., 2013).

When implementing the EPER PPT, Japanese students' scores often result in lower levels than the level of their TOEIC score as Table 1 suggests. The left side of Table 2 shows some of the average EPER PPT scores in the beginning of extensive reading programs in a few Japanese private universities in west Japan. These institutions are all known to have high reputations in the area. The scores' interpretations, in terms of EPER levels, OBW levels and TOEIC scores mentioned in Table 1 have been inserted into the right side of Table 2. Although a few institutions' score averages suggest that their EPER levels are equivalent to the level of the average college TOEIC score, most of the institutional results suggest that these students need to start at the lowest level of the graded readers.

Table 2. EPER PPT average scores of universities in west Japan

Source	Year	M	EPER Level	OBW Level	TOEIC
Takase (2007)	1st	18.3	E	1	150
	2nd (S campus)	19.0	E	1	150
	2nd (T campus)	19.4	E	1	150
Takase (2008)	1st	16.3	F	Starters	-
	1st	25.4	D	2	300
	2nd	22.5	E	1	150
	2nd	24.8	D/E	2/1	300/150
Takase (2012)	mixed (Upper)	22.1	E	1	150
	mixed (Middle)	14.8	F	Starters	-
	mixed (Lower)	8.1	G	-	-
Yoshizawa et al. (2013)	1st	40.27	C	3	450
	2nd	41.63	C	3	450
Yamashina et al. (2011)	1st (Most Read)	34.6*	C/D	3/2	450/300
	1st (Least Read)	24.8*	D/E	2/1	300/150

* These scores were obtained through shortened time constrains of 30 minutes instead of the full 60 minutes of test time suggested by EPER PPT.

The report of the 2015 results of EPER PPT score averages

As being discussed, a successful extensive reading program requires a large volume of truly easy readings. This “easy” reading is a key to successful fluency building; yet the levels of students vary in different schools and settings. Where do the students in my class belong in terms of reading? Are my students’ reading levels categorized into almost the same as the results shown by other researchers? To investigate, the aforementioned EPER PPT test was conducted for five different first-year reading classes as well as one reading class of second- and third-year students on the first day of their course in April 2015. As seen in Yamashina et al. (2011), this test was also shortened to 30 minutes instead of the full 60 minutes. The students were then instructed to start reading the lowest level graded or leveled readers they could find in the library even before their EPER PPT test results were made known.

The average EPER PPT scores of the six reading classes in April, 2015 are shown in Table 3, along with EPER and OBW level interpretations. The average of all 129 students indicates that their average level of reading falls in the EPER Level F, which equals to the OBW Starter level. Some classes are lower than the others; however, the average scores illustrate that these students are not ready to read the intermediate level readings such as OBW Stage 2, 3, or 4.

Table 3. EPER PPT scores and their level interpretations in April 2015

Class majors	Class	Year	N	M	EPER Level	OBW Level
All			129	16.22	F	Starters
English Intensive		1st	34	12.24	F	Starters
Letters	English Intensive	1st	19	14.21	F	Starters
Law	English Intensive	1st	15	9.73	G	-
Regular Reading			95	17.65	E/F	1/Starters
Letters	Top-Level	1st	22	22.86	E	1
Economics	Top-Level	1st	26	18.34	E	1
BA*	Top-Level	1st	26	15.19	F	Starters
Mixed	Mid-Level	2nd+	21	14.38	F	Starters

*Business Administration

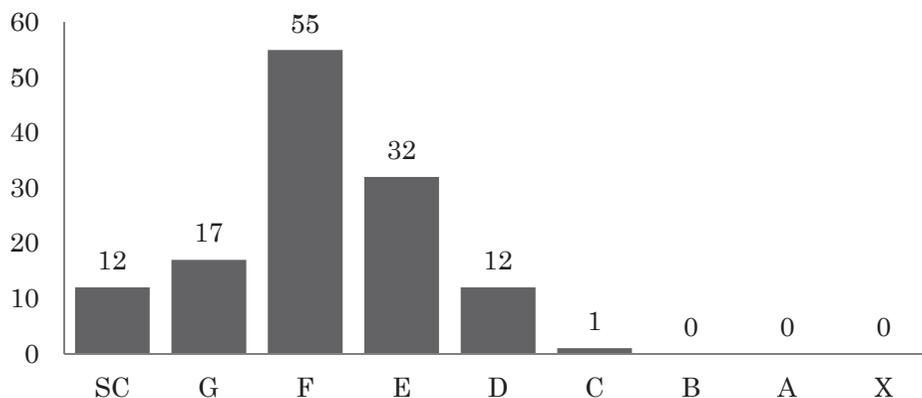


Figure 3. April 2015 frequency distribution of EPER levels.

While Table 3 reports the average scores of EPER PPT for the six reading classes in April, 2015, Figure 3 shows the frequency distribution of EPER levels that were suggested to individual students by their scores. Although most of these classes are among the highest level English classes in the university, only one student was placed into C (OBW Stage 3); no one scored higher than she did. Out of 129 students, 12 students were placed in Level D (OBW Stage 2). However, the majority of students fell under the Starter level of OBW and Penguin Readers (PGR) (Level E = 32 students, Level F = 55 students). There were yet 12 students who were measured as “Starter Card Level (SC),” who were “not ready to read a book.”

After one semester of extensive reading, another version of the EPER PPT was administered for the same students. Descriptive statistics of the EPER PPT scores (Table 4) show the results of two groups: the Intensive English Group and the Regular Reading Group. These groups were separately analyzed because the former group had met twice a week and finished the courses in one semester. The latter group includes year-long courses. All of the students were instructed to read at least 50,000 words by the end of the course; therefore, the English Intensive students in one-semester courses had to read the amount in a shorter period of time than the regular year-long course students. As the amount of the reading they did in one semester is significantly different, those two groups had been reported separately.

Each group experienced significant gains in the EPER PPT score averages even with only one semester of easy extensive reading. From April to July, English Intensive course students averaged 47,771 words of reading leveled and

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the EPER results, gain scores, and total word counts

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max
English Intensive				
April 2015 PPT Scores	12.23	4.65	2	21
July 2015 PPT Scores	14.59	5.68	7	29
Gain (April→July)	2.3	5.47	-9	12
Total Words	47,771	14,265	1,176	60,727
Regular Reading				
April 2015 PPT Scores	17.74	6.89	2	37
July 2015 PPT Scores	19.71	7.66	4	47
Gain (April→July)	1.97	5.33	-11	20
Total Words	14,522	13,565	0	59,388

graded readers, and gained an average of 12 points on the PPT as a group ($t(33)=1.69, p<.01$). Regular Reading class students had not yet read 15,000 words at the end of the first semester, but showed significant improvements on PPT scores ($t(94)=3.54, p<.001$).

Table 5. t-test results

	<i>t</i>
English Intensive ($d=33$)	1.69*
Regular Reading ($d=94$)	3.54**

* $p<.01$, ** $p<.001$

Discussion

The low results of the April EPER PPT should be noted. Only a handful of students were placed into the common graded reader levels such as OBW Stage 1 or above. The results showed the majority of the students that they should start reading as low as possible, although most of the students were placed into higher level English classes according to GTEC scores which probably tested their explicit knowledge. This attests that Japanese college students need more basic reading skills training to automatize their grammar and vocabulary into procedural knowledge when reading books, which are different from textbooks.

For those who received Starter level placement, or below, truly easy readers cannot be found in OBW or PGR because they do not have a lower level than “Starters.” Also, these publishers have limited issues of starter-level readers. Luckily for them, our university library has a special “Language Learning Room”

called the Cosmos Room where not only many titles of graded readers but also a wide range of leveled readers, such as “An I Can Read” series or Oxford Reading Trees, which are intended for L1 children. It also houses much easier graded reader series such as the Foundations Reading Library. Utilizing these available books is essential for those students who are not ready to read the OBW or PGR series of graded readers. Takase (2010) also emphasizes the importance of such leveled readers or even picture books (many of which the Cosmos Room does carry) for building a basis for reading books. She strongly recommends her students to read tens or even hundreds of picture books or children’s books (leveled readers, such as Oxford Reading Tree) before they start reading the lowest level graded readers. She claims that those who read enough easy readers will soar in their reading toward the end of the semester in terms of the reading levels as well as the amount of reading.

Her claim may explain the same score gains of the two groups, regardless of the different total word count average. The English Intensive students finished almost 50,000 words on average by the end of July as instructed by the teacher, while Regular Reading students had the luxury of going slow because they have summer vacation and the second semester to reach the minimum target of total words: Only read 30 percent of what English Intensive students had finished. Still, Regular Reading students gained as much in EPER PPT scores from April to July as the English Intensive students. The Regular Reading students may have allowed themselves for more time for lower level reading with that luxury which English Intensive students did not have: Lower readings contain less words, and to reach the target word counts in a short period of time, English Intensive students needed to push themselves to read higher level readings with many words.

The gains could have resulted from the intensive English instruction they received for 13 weeks between the pre and post EPER PPTs, though this cannot be determined because of the lack of a control group/experiment group design. However, if intensive English instruction has affected the gains, English Intensive students should have gained much more than the Regular Reading students because English Intensive students met twice a week while the Regular Reading students met only once a week. Coverage of the textbook for Regular Reading students involved only half of what Intensive English students accomplished. The gain score averages did not show any significant difference between these groups ($t(127)=0.39, p=0.35$).

Conclusions and implications for future research

This paper reports that extensive reading instruction should be implemented for the purpose of reading fluency building. By exposing students to a large volume of text, using graded and leveled readers, readers develop basic decoding skills and bring their skills to a point of automaticity. Also, the volume of reading must come with a certain quality: Easy enough reading so that students can practice their explicit knowledge rapidly and repeatedly in order to turn it into their procedural knowledge, which can be practiced automatically.

For this purpose of extensive reading, Japanese college students' suggested levels for graded readers from the data herein, as well as from related literature, have been shown above. Both data sets suggest that most Japanese students should start reading from a very low level of reader, as low as, or below, the starter level of OBW and PGR. Some leveled readers intended for small L1 children or lower level graded readers such as the Foundations Reading Library must be utilized, especially for those who have not developed book reading skills, which is quite different from what they have practiced with difficult textbook readings.

In addition, the possibility of the higher gains in EPER PPT scores resulting from easier reading was discussed. Although the possibility is only suggestive because of the limitation of the data, further studies may support Takase's claim (2010) of much lower level reading at the beginning of the extensive reading leading to higher score gains. Analyzing which books were actually read and their levels or establishing control-experiment groups are necessary. However, all in all, the EPER score reported in some research as well as the data herein from April and July suggest that very low level readers, which appear to be insultingly too low for some teachers and students, need to be recognized as the basic tools for successful extensive reading programs.

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