The Effects of a Limited Extensive Reading Program

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Abstract

近年日本における多読の浸透は著しく、多くの大学で取り入れられている。しかし、その取り入れ方は多種多様であり、その中でも多読環境が整わない中、講師の裁量で付け足しのように多読が行われている授業は少なくない。本稿ではリーディングの授業の中で多読を導入しているが、実際には宿題として授業外でのみ多読する環境で学生がどのように読み、また多読のテストでどのような得点を取ったのかを検証した。SSR もなく、講師による指導が行き届かない状態で行った多読において、読了語数と、多読用テストの得点を使用し、大学１年生３クラス全体での１年間の推移を追った。平均読了語数は５万語程度の低い水準にとどまったが、それでも事前と事後のテストの平均得点は有意に伸びており、理想的な環境での多読導入でなくとも一定の結果が得られるのではないかということが示唆された。

Keywords: extensive reading, graded readers, SSR

Overview

Extensive reading instruction has been drawing attention in Japanese universities from the point of remedial education and reading fluency building. Even to establish the fundamental reading skill of decoding text, more “exposure to print” is essential in terms of building automatic word recognition skills (Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Kadota, 2007). Hence, providing the large volume of reading, extensive reading is recognized as an essential part of re-building such skills and supplementing reading courses to boost students’ reading fluency.

Many researchers in Japan suggest an abundant benefit from extensive reading. The improvement in students’ motivation is often noted (e.g., Mason & Krashen, 1997; Takase, 2008, 2010; Yamashita & Kan, 2010). Others claim the effectiveness of vocabulary learning (e.g., Robb & Susser, 1990; Shillaw, 1999), lexical access speed (e.g., Yamashita & Kan 2010; Yamashina & Tsurii 2011), and reading speed (e.g., Robb & Susser, 1990; Yamashita & Ichikawa, 2010). Also, development in comprehension and overall proficiency levels has been reported

widely through extensive reading programs (Krashen 2004; Lemmer, 2006; Yamashita, 2008; Takase 2008, 2012). Thus, administering extensive reading through a reading curriculum and in the classroom can be assumed to bring about a positive influence on students' reading abilities.

Though many schools have recognized the importance of extensive reading and tried to incorporate such instructions into their curriculum and classrooms, many teachers still struggle to implement extensive reading, especially in the context of Japanese universities with administrative or curriculum restrictions. College reading classes in Japan are often designed to focus on intensive English learning with the emphasis of reading strategies and skills, vocabulary acquisition, and accurate comprehension. Most extensive reading instruction is added to such classes as a small part of class time or homework assignments (Akamatsu, 2006; Lemmer, 2006; Inagaki & Inagaki, 2008). This is not ideal for a successful extensive reading program which "requires a significant effort to motivate students … [and] effective curricular guidelines to give the program appropriate structure, rationale, and goals" (Grabe, 2009, p. 326).

Grabe summarizes the recommendation for engaging students in extensive reading (2009. p. 327):

1. Provide many attractive reading materials and have a class library.
2. Provide time for free reading or SSR in class.
3. Create many opportunities for all types of reading, in class and out.
4. Read interesting material to students.
5. Find out what students like to read and why.
6. Create a reading lab and give students time for free reading.
7. Create ways to interest students in reading topics.
8. Keep records and provide simple and appropriate rewards.
9. Create incentives to start students in their reading.
10. Have students take books and magazines home.
11. Let students read magazines and comic books in class.
12. Talk about what you read and why that material is interesting to you.
13. Have students share and recommend reading material.

In many Japanese colleges, numbers 1, 3, 7, 10, and possibly 6 could be provided by school libraries, but the rest must be provided by instructors from their own enthusiasm. Ideally, in-class SSR (sustained silent reading) of 30 minutes or more

should be included in class time in order to secure busy students reading time, encourage students to read more, and monitor students reading (Takase & Otsuki, 2012, Hase, et. al., 2015). Most of the support to create students' engagement in reading relies on the instructors' extra time and effort.

However, prescribed intensive-English-focused curriculum goals often prevent the luxury of SSR in every class time and result in no or very short SSR in class. Likewise, teachers' extra work is necessary to help students engage in extensive reading, in addition to the regular teaching duties required from their schools. In such cases, extensive reading must be read outside of the class without enough guidance or instructions from the teachers. Sometimes under time constraints, teachers simply "wish" their students would read as much as they can and as much as the teachers hope for.

Providing the actual practice in class and detailed instructions from teachers may not in fact be as ideal as the teachers wish under the time constraints in Japanese colleges; however, students can still engage in reading voluntary outside the classroom with appropriate guidance. Krashen (2004) suggests reading proficiency can be gained by such free voluntary reading. Moreover, reading at home is indeed an important aspect of extensive reading. If teachers assumed the students to engage in reading without SSR, how much reading would these students actually engage in? Can extensive reading be successful only as homework assignments and improve students' reading?

The Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate how students to whom extensive reading was assigned as homework without SSR improve their reading abilities. Also, it is to observe the amount of reading students engaged in with minimum guidance on extensive reading from the instructor.

This study analyzes the results from a one-year (two-semester) reading course for first year students in a Japanese private college. This intensive reading course consists of three classes with extensive reading as homework assignments. Using the results of these classes, analyses were conducted in order to investigate: 1) How much improvement can be seen in the students' reading levels and EPER scores in a year; and 2) Is there any relationship between EPER score gains and the amount of reading.

Participants and Procedures

Three reading classes with extensive reading as homework assignments have been monitored for their progress of reading graded or leveled readers. The readers were provided by the school library, which houses a full-scale of graded readers and leveled readers available in Japan. The extensive reading amount was calculated by the word counts reported in short book reports students submitted for each book they finished reading. Students were instructed to read at least 50,000 words by the end of the two semesters, and encouraged to read more. As an incentive to read, they were informed that extensive reading occupies 15% of their final grade.

Basic and minimum guidance for extensive reading was provided at the beginning and throughout the two semesters. Students received a short written guideline stating information regarding the rational for extensive reading and how to choose books. At least once a month, the instructor calculated the total amount of words each student had read up to that point and made a bar graph of the word count, using Microsoft Excel, to show their individual progress in reading, as well as the different progress between the students, to each class. There was no individual consultation or encouragement for extensive reading, though students as a whole were often reminded to read and turn in their book reports.

Table 1. EPER levels and their interpretations

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

Adapted from Herbert (2016); originally 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 (SC) level because EPER describes this level with such a name in L1 Reading.

Throughout the two semesters during which they read low level graded readers or leveled readers, those students were tested on their story reading ability by EPER tests. EPER, the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading[1], provides a cloze test to assess each students' level of reading 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). 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 students' levels of reading. The test time was shortened to 30 minutes, from the original 60 minutes, due to time constraints and with the intention of incorporating reading speed into the test, as done in other research (Yamashina, et. al., 2011; Herbert, 2016). The test takers' raw scores were converted into standardized scores, as instructed in EPER procedures, to determine their reading level in accordance with the graded reader level. The EPER score interpretations are shown in Table 1.

The two versions of the EPER PPT, A and E, were used at the beginning and the end of both semesters: April 2015, July 2015, September 2015, and January 2016. To counterbalance the different versions, though EPER claims them to be parallel versions (IALS, University of Edinburgh, Notes for Users), each class was administered in either an A-E-E-A or E-A-A-E pattern for each test time. Their raw scores were converted into standardized scores for comparison and for recognizing their reading level for graded readers.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of EPER scores, word counts, and gain scores

	M	SD	Min	Max
EPER Scores				
April 2015	18.71	6.84	3	37
July 2015	20.47	7.94	4	47
September 2015	21.24	8.24	2	43
January 2016	22.07	8.68	3	46
Total Word Count				
Spring	17,009	14,975	490	59,388
Final	45,695	25,111	1,112	104,550
Gained Score				
Apr→Jul (spring)	1.76	5.63	-11	20
Apr→Jan (final)	3.37	4.77	-10	17

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

The classes contained about 25 students each. However, some students stopped attending the class or failed to take one or more EPER tests, and/or reported obviously untrustworthy book reports. Only those students were removed from the data, but in the end, 68 students were analyzed.

Results

The three aforementioned year-long classes together contained 68 valid data cases and showed improvement during the academic year. As can be seen in the descriptive analysis in Table 2, the average initial score on the EPER PPT was 18.71, which moved up to 20.47 with the average word count being 17,009 in the end of the first semester. The average score reached 22.07 when these students finished the full two semesters with an average word count of 45,694. This progress was illustrated in Figure 1. The significant difference in one semester, between April and July ($t(67)=2.58$, $p<.05$), and in two semesters, between April and next January ($t(67)=5.82$, $p<.01$), was demonstrated by the *t*-tests. On the other hand, there was no significant difference between July and September when almost no students read as they were on holiday ($t(67)=1.381$, $p=.172$). However, it can be said that students in these three classes together performed significantly better on EPER PPT at the end of one academic year.

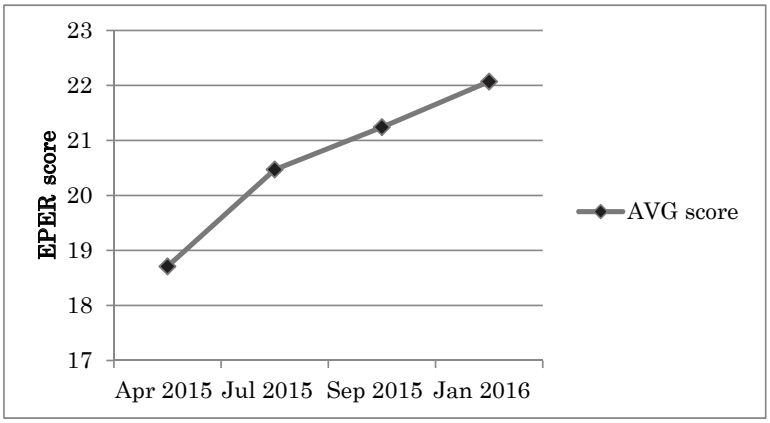

Figure 1. The average EPER scores

As EPER scores always can be interpreted into pre-determined EPER reading levels, the number of students in each level at the beginning and the end of each semester illustrates how the students' reading level had shifted. Table 3 shows the number of students who were placed into each EPER level in April

2015, July 2015, and January 2016. When the numbers shown in January was compared to those in April, more students appeared in higher EPER levels. Figure 2 only shows the results between April 2015 and January 2016. It displays the fewer lower-level readers and more higher-level readers in January 2016.

Table 3. The number of students in each EPER level

Level	Apr 2015	Jul 2015	Jan 2016
SC	2	2	2
G	6	7	1
F	23	15	22
E	26	29	20
D	10	11	16
C	1	3	6
B	0	1	1

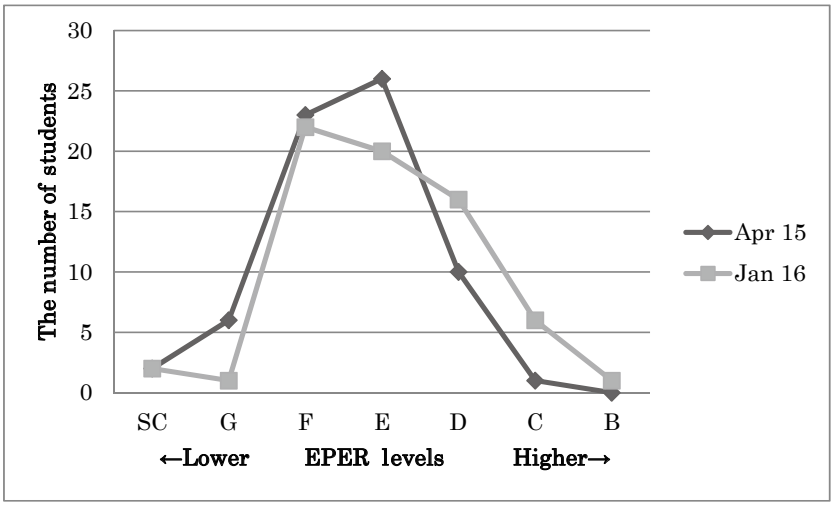

Figure 2. EPER level shifts between April 2015 and January 2016

To gain such improvement on EPER PPT, on average these 68 students read more or less around 50,000 words as a set minimum goal, ranging from just over 1,000 words to over 100,000 words read. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the word counts and the EPER PPT scores. The amount the students read showed a weak, positive correlation with their EPER score gains both in spring and in the end. As shown in Table 4, r=.285 (p<.05) was noted for the relationship between spring word counts and gain scores over one semester (between April 2015 and July 2015). The relationship between the final word counts and final gain scores, over

one academic year, resulted in r=.280 (p<.05). In both the spring results and the end results, the students with higher word counts demonstrated the better gain scores to a certain degree.

Other Pearson's r figures are also shown in Table 4. There were strong positive correlations among the PPT scores of April, July, and January. Also, a moderate positive correlation between spring and final word counts can be seen with r=.602.

The correlation between the final gain scores (April 2015→January 2016) and total amount of reported reading was further investigated by one-way ANOVA to determine the relationship between the gained score levels and the amount of reading by the students. The final gain scores were re-categorized into 4 groups: Gain Level 0 (Gain≦0), Gain Level 1 (Gain=1-5), Gain Level 2 (gain=6-10), and Gain Level 3 (Gain≧11). There was rather high, but not significant enough probability to show the difference between these four groups (F(3, 64)=2.399, p=.076).

Table 4. Correlation between scores, word counts (WC), and gains (n=68)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. April Score	-	.719**	.837**	.239*	.239*	-.201	.091
2. July Score		-	.748**	.408**	.369**	.536**	.331**
3. Jan Score			-	.388**	.342**	.037	.620**
4. Spring WC				-	.602**	.285*	.365**
5. Final WC					-	.268*	.280*
6. Gain: Apr → Jul							.356**
7. Gain: Apr → Jan							-

**p<.01, *p<.05

The relationship between these groups in different categories was also trialed by one-way ANOVA. There was no significant difference among these groups in the April EPER scores (F(3, 64)=.478, p=.698). However, there appeared some statistically significant differences between these groups in July 2015 scores (F(3, 64)=4.443, p<.05), January 2016 scores (F (3, 64)=12.826, p<.01), spring word count (F (3, 64)=4.015, p<.05) and spring gains (April 2015 → July 2016, F (3, 64)=4.275, p<.05). Further statistical analysis by applying the Bonferroni correction confirms the significant difference particularly between Gain Level 0 and Gain Level 3 groups in these four categories (p<.05).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the results from one-year-long reading classes without SSR and without much reading support from the instructor, in terms of EPER scores for reading abilities and word counts for the amount students read. The first question asked was "How much improvement can be seen in their reading level and EPER scores in a year." As shown in the Results section, students' average scores increased significantly from April to July and from April to January the following year. Though the average score gain from 18.71 to 22.07 was not high enough to show an EPER level shift upward overall, showing statistically significant gains was noteworthy since there were a few whose gained scores actually fell to a negative value not by a few points but by 10 points and many unenthusiastic readers were included in the data.

Not only did the overall mean score increase but also many of the students' levels shifted upward individually when compared from the beginning to the end. This tendency is rather promising for extensive reading because the higher the graded reader level is, the more words students are expected to read in one book. Once they can be placed into higher level reading schemes, students are more likely to read more, entering the "virtuous circle of the good reader" (Nuttall, 1996). In such a circle, a reader reading more leads to better understanding; better understanding leads to the enjoyment of reading. If one enjoys reading, he or she reads faster and reads more to enter the endless beneficial circle of reading. In addition, these students recognizing the upward level shift shown by the EPER PPT may gain confidence to read in English and are encouraged to read more.

The second research question was "Is there any relationship between EPER score gains and the amount of reading?" It should be noted that the amount of reading the participants read in this study comes just under 20,000 words in spring and 50,000 at the end of the course; this is a rather small amount compared with other extensive reading research reported in this field. For example, Yoshizawa et. al. (2013) report their students' average being between approximately 100,000 and 200,000 words in one year. Yamashina, et. al. (2011) show that their least read group of 30 students read 100,000 words on average. Takase (2008) also cites an average around 100,000 words in one year. However, these are the examples of successful extensive reading with SSR and full in-class teacher guidance. In the same study, Takase (2008) mentions the mean word counts of just over 50,000 words for those classes where students only read graded readers outside of classrooms. Considering the fact that the one year course

studied in this paper included no SSR or individual support for choosing books, reading a little less than 50,000 words was a reasonable amount of reading done in one year only as out-of-class reading.

Though the amount of reading the 68 students did was not as much as a full-extensive reading program could stimulate, students made significant gains in their EPER PPT scores. In addition, as for the t-test result mentioned above, Pearson's *r* figures provided some evidence that the more they read, the higher gains they achieved. According to Grabe's (2009) review of the research from 1990 on, the overall amount of reading correlates significantly with reading achievement at r=.20, and the current study indicated *r* being around .28 with a high probability. This fact suggests that these participants read adequately and appropriately even without the instructor's thorough guidance for extensive reading.

Regarding other Pearson's *r* figures, it is fairly natural for spring and final scores to correlate with their gain scores since the gain scores themselves were calculated by these numbers. Similarly, the spring word count showing correlation with the final word count is understandable as the final count was calculated by adding fall semester word counts on top of the spring word counts. However, the ANOVA results remain suggestive for who actually scored more and read more, in relation with July and January scores and spring and final word counts. Dividing the final gain scores into the four levels, there was some effect of the level groups on EPER scores and the reading amount, except for the initial April EPER score. Particularly, for the July scores, January scores, and spring word counts, there was a consistent difference shown between the lowest gain level and the highest gain level groups. Considering the high correlation coefficient among these categories, there must be some relation between these categories and the actual gain scores at the end; possibly by the end of the first, spring semester in July, those who would read a lot and see significant gains may be foreseeable. Further investigation may bring an interesting factor into extensive reading in terms of who responds best to extensive reading instruction.

Conclusion

This paper focused on investigating a one-year long reading course in which students read graded readers only outside of class, with limited guidance by the instructor. Like many Japanese college English reading classes, this particular course was not the ideal way to incorporate extensive reading. Despite the lack of

SSR and thorough instruction from the teacher, the participants in general read adequately and appropriately to achieve better EPER PPT scores in the end. It is true that one cannot neglect the influence on those score gains from the intensive English learning that the students were engaged in through other classes. However, correlations still support the score gains in accordance with the amount of graded readers students read. Moreover, the design of EPER PPT being particularly for determining students reading level helps to interpret the scores with a focus on extensive reading ability, not intensive reading ability. The data provided here are not conclusive, but they are the results of typical Japanese extensive reading practice. With such limited practice showing benefits on students' reading ability, one can assume the full-scale practice will benefit the students even more. Starting from a minimum introduction of extensive reading, perhaps advocates of extensive reading may be able to shift toward the integration of intensive and extensive reading and push their programs and curriculum goals to reach better balanced reading courses.

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