

English Fluency Training Applications for Extensive Reading Collections

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the incorporation of extensive reading (ER) in foreign language programs has become a common practice as results have demonstrated that when students choose easy books and enjoy reading in a foreign language, not only does their language competency improve, but their attitude towards learning also becomes more positive. Worldwide, Japan is known for experimenting with various approaches to supporting students' language skills development through encouraging the reading of large quantities of books for pleasure. Evidence of this can be easily found by browsing through the catalogs of the major English language education publishers. They all dedicate pages to describing series of graded readers used for ER programs. Furthermore, new series and improved components are continually being developed. Although studies and experts vary slightly (Claridge, 2011; Grabe & Stoller, 2011) in their definition of 'extensive reading' and exact results for skills and vocabulary improvement, Grabe and Stoller (2012) argue that although beginners in a foreign language can advance to the intermediate level by doing language practice exercises, it is virtually impossible for intermediate level students to improve without reading significant quantities of materials.

1.1 Extensive reading collections and their current use at Surugadai University

Over the years, efforts have been made to improve upon the English education offered at Surugadai University, and, like many other Japanese universities, offers support for ER programs. English teaching faculty members have created two collections of graded readers for English learners. Along with the textbooks, resource materials and e-learning software available in the self-study sections of the Language Education Center (LEC) as well as resource materials in the Media Center, these collections constitute a significant part of the out-of-class English

resources available to students on campus.

The first collection was created in 1994 by Professor Emeritus Morijiro Shibayama in an effort to enable 1st year students to experience success in reading simple English books. It is housed in the Media Center and consists of over 4,000 books in the Language Laboratory section. All of these books are available for students to check out, with a small portion having audio CDs available for on-site listening in the audio/visual section. Shibayama was greatly influenced by lectures given by foreign language education scholars and practitioners in Japan such as Marc Helgesen at JALT (Japan Association of Language Teaching) on the English program at Miyagi Gakuen Women's College and Beniko Mason's presentation at JACET (Japan Association of College English Teaching) entitled "My class — the introduction of the extensive reading program at IBU". His approach was also formed by international scholars such as Frank Smith, Kenneth Goodman, Patricia Carrel, Richard Day and Julian Bamford, all of whom demonstrated practical ways to incorporate the reading of books in beginner classes, and whose studies demonstrated how valuable this practice is for developing motivated learners who take away from their class experience skills for life.

Shibayama (2012) used the Media Center collection with the following principles in mind: Students choose what they want to read; students share the experience with peers as well as with the teacher; and the instructor reads books from the same collection and shares the experience with the students. He divided the books into four sections: (A) For beginners; (B) for lower intermediate; (C) for upper intermediate; and (D) for advanced. The books were employed in English I, the 1st year required reading class, with the expectation that students read at least one book every two weeks. They turned in a simple form noting the title, publisher, number of pages and a short summary describing the main characters, events and their reaction. The instructor returned the form with some comments and a few grammatical corrections, if necessary. He also honored excellent work by showing anonymous samples on the overhead projector or having students read their report to the class. Writing samples in the Reading Laboratory Newsletter (Uehara, et. al.,

1994) illustrate that students both understood the content of the books and often related to them on a personal level. Librarians also expressed their pleasure with this program as it encouraged students to use the library.

The other collection is located in the open study space of the LEC and is a part of the self-access language learning approach explained in Sawazaki and Takenaka's (2010) paper on international practices in SALCs (self-access language centers), the founding of Surugadai University's center and the initial programs and usage of the materials. This collection was made available to students in the fall of the academic year 2009. By 2012, the collection included about 450 English graded readers, most of which have either audio CDs or CD-ROMS so students can listen to the content in the center. In contrast to the A, B, C, D leveled organization of the Media Center collection, the graded readers in the LEC were placed on the shelves according to the publisher and series. The following are the main series in the collection: Penguin Readers, Penguin Active Reading, Oxford Bookworms Library, Dominoes (Oxford University Press), Macmillan Readers, Cambridge English Readers, and Info Trail (from Pearson Education's Literacy Land).

Usage of the LEC collection included two primary groups: Students who are motivated to study English independently and are guided in the usage of these materials by English instructors; and students required to use the materials as part of a class assignment. As this collection had a much shorter history than the one in the Media Center, the collection was used very little in the first year. Having used ER as an important component in her language teaching practices, and having been experienced in using the Media Center and personal collections, the author (hereafter referred to as "the instructor") decided to integrate the usage of this collection in the four English II classes she was responsible for teaching. In the academic year 2011, she conducted the action research project upon which this study is based and also encouraged other instructors of English II to use the collections and exchange ideas.

1.2 Extensive reading benefits

Despite the impressive scale of these collections, some students and English teaching faculty are perceptibly hesitant to actively employ their usage. This situation is not uncommon in institutions and can often be attributed to a general unawareness of the procedures for integrating the usage of these books within the foreign language curriculum, and the lack of belief in the benefits of using these resources (Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Claridge, 2011).

At the same time, studies clearly demonstrate the benefit of using ER in second language programs for elevating vocabulary levels (e.g., Elly, 1991; Day, Omura, and Hiramatsu (1991); Krashen, 1993; Hayashi, 1999; Hsui, 2000; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006). Various studies by researchers such as Tudor and Hafiz and Tsang (as cited in Nation, 1997) reported significant increases in vocabulary recognition. ER practices were shown to improve students' writing skills in studies by Janopoulos and Tudor & Hafiz (as cited in Nation, N.D.) and Krashen (1997a). Elly and Mangubhia's 'Book Flood' research in Fiji (1981a; 1981b) reported dramatic improvements in various language skills as reading comprehension, grammatical knowledge, word recognition, oral repetition and writing. The motivation factor is also quite significant and studies by McQuillan in 1994 and replicated by Dupuy in 1997 have also shown that not only do students tend to enjoy reading books to gain language skills, they often found it more beneficial than direct grammar instruction (as cited in Asraf & Ahmad, 2003, para. 1). Nation (N.D., p. 3) charts a comprehensive overview of twenty international studies of the benefits of extensive reading for second and foreign language learning, including eight studies that took place in Japan between 1989 and 2008 for secondary school aged students and above.

It is commonly stated among Japanese that students are quite proficient at reading, yet lack effective communication skills. In practice, however, the instructor found that her students were often good at analyzing sentences and thinking in terms of isolated lexical points while lacking skills in reading lengthy passages for either pleasure or learning content. Unfortunately, however, in recent years she has found that the great majority of her students lack even those basic analytical skills as their

level of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge has been on a steady decline. It is the lack of vocabulary that posed the most significant challenge for the instructor in meeting the primary aim of English II — to have students actively engage in communicative activities. So, both vocabulary development and opportunities for communicative acts were necessary in this once-a-week course. It was apparent that relying solely on in-class activities would be insufficient to attain this goal.

The instructor asked the 91 first-year students in her four English II courses (See Section 1.3 Participants for details.) if they had ever read a book in English, and only one had, and this student had simply read one book. When asked to read short passages from their communicative textbook, they often read with halts and starts, and found even the most basic words difficult to pronounce or understand. Without helping these students build a solid foundation in English, it would be unrealistic to expect them to gain any significant comprehension or production skills. Given the short time spent with these students (approximately 42 instruction hours over 30 weeks in the academic year) the instructor needed to choose the most efficient and effective way to educate these students.

Richard Day outlines the overall benefits of using ER in his first article of a series meant to help English teachers implement this approach in their schools.

When EFL students read extensively, they become fluent readers. But there is more. Studies have established that EFL students increase their vocabulary, and become better writers. We also know that reading extensively helps increase oral fluency—listening and speaking abilities. Finally, students who read a lot develop positive attitudes toward reading and increased motivation to study the foreign language. So there are some excellent reasons for having EFL students reading extensively.

Day, R., 2003, p. 1

Reading graded readers can be used not only to help students gain reading, vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, but can also give students the necessary content to use for simple communicative activities and confidence in understanding

natural English. Reading for content and engaging in discussions afterwards is an effective way to improve communication skills (Sawazaki, 2002; 2003; Yamashita, 2008). So, the instructor chose to incorporate the reading of graded readers as a tool to help students improve their communication skills.

In addition to pedagogical reasons for incorporating ER in the English II, the instructor had a practical reason for integrating ER in these classes. As English II is the only required English communicative class for Surugadai University students, assignments should be designed to both help them develop study skills that can be employed later, if necessary, and to introduce them to the out-of-class materials available on campus. At the time this study began, no other official uses of the two collections of graded readers existed. This could be seen as an inefficient use of a substantial university resource. By engaging in a participant-observer action research project, the instructor could hopefully further develop an effective use of these collections, share her findings with other faculty members, and collaborate on future projects. Preliminary findings of this study were shared with all English II teachers at the January 21, 2012 annual discussion of English education at Surugadai University (*Eigo Kyoiku Kyouka Uchiawase*). For those who were unable to attend, handouts were sent. Teachers were encouraged to employ the usage of graded readers in their English II classes in the 2012 academic year.

1.3 The present study

Although the usage of ER in foreign language education is becoming more widely used, and, compared to other countries, is quite widely embraced among practitioners in Japan, there still exist deep misunderstandings about the importance of and practices for the incorporation of extensive reading for language development (Claridge, 2011; Grabe, 2012). This paper addresses three areas in an aim to overcome these misunderstandings, and to explore possible applications of ER at Surugadai University. Firstly, it aims to inform educators, both foreign language and non-foreign language instructors, of the research in the area of using extensive reading as a part of a foreign language program along with the pedagogical views of the most prominent specialists in this area. Next, the

procedures of using the two Surugadai University ER libraries are explained. Lastly, student feedback is summarized, analyzed and proposals for future changes in adopting graded readers in English II discussed.

2 Method

2.1 Procedure

Usage of graded readers was incorporated as a part of the required course for graduation, English II, in the academic year 2011 (See Section 3 for details). English II, English for Communication Skills, is taken by 1st year students and, according to the objectives in the English version of the LEC syllabus, the purpose is to have students “work in pairs or small groups, interacting with each other in a friendly manner, and giving everyone an equal opportunity to practice and gain communicative skills in English”. The instructor studied approaches to using ER, canvased and selected appropriate materials, and made lesson plans and materials that would be in line with the goals of the course. For this study, she kept records of classroom proceedings and administered a questionnaire at the end of the academic year.

2.2 Participants

Four courses were used for this study, all of which were taught by the author of this paper. Each faculty divides their students into different proficiency level groups according to their score on the Japanese-created English proficiency test, G-TELP (General Tests of English Language Proficiency). The four participatory groups included students from both a variety of faculties and proficiency groups, so it can be said that although the number of participants (N = 91) was only about 10% of the total number of students taking English II (approximately 909 students), the range constituted a fair representation of this student body. The four groups were: (1) Faculty of Media and Information Resources, N=24; (2) Faculty of Contemporary Cultures, N=20; (3) Faculty of Law, N=25; and (4) Faculty of Economics, N=22. The only faculty not represented in this group was the Faculty of Psychology.

Although students' level of general English proficiency was of a significant range,

they all had basically the same amount of experience in reading books in English — none. As stated previously, only one out of the 91 students had had any experience reading English books. Furthermore, students stated that their only exposure to lengthy passages of English print was from textbooks. As textbook passages are generally explained through a grammar-translation method, students do not have many opportunities to read fluently. In addition, the instructor aimed to give students an authentic experience in reading English, something that they could not always have when limited to using a textbook (Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010).

3. Extensive reading programs

3.1 Extensive reading in L2 education

The term “extensive” in extensive reading (ER) was coined by the pioneer of modern language education, Harold Palmer who defined this practice as reading many books rapidly with a focus on meaning (Palmer 1917; 1921; 1968), in Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 5). This way is opposed to intensive reading whereby learners study a text line by line while translating and thinking about grammar. Incidentally, Palmer was a proponent of both types of reading (Smith, 1999).

ER has been widely accepted as an important component to L1 and L2 education (Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Bamford & Day, 1997; Day & Bamford, 1998; Mason & Krashen, 1997a; Krashen, 1993; Nishizawa, 2009). Studies by Japanese scholars such as Takase and Kobayashi, Kawachi, Fukaya, Sato and Tani (as cited in Takase, 2007), just to name a few, have demonstrated how valuable ER is in English education in Japan. In particular, the benefit of increased motivation, especially for low-level Japanese university students is an attractive factor when engaging in curriculum design (Mason & Krashen, 1997b; Takase, 2007).

Reading a large amount of materials is one of the best ways to gain fluent reading skills (Grabe, 2009). To be a fluent reader, experiencing a high-level of automaticity while reading is imperative. In other words, being able to recognize words as sight words rather than decoding words by breaking them into individual sounds, is crucial for fluent reading and comprehension. Pressley's study (2006) found that

fluent L1 readers are able to recognize at some level about 98-100% of the words they encounter. When reading to learn content, they read at about 200 words per minute; and when reading for pleasure they read between 250-300 words per minute. For a L2 learner to achieve this ability, thousands of hours in practice in reading is generally necessary.

Grabe (2011, pp. 105-7) summarizes research in how ER effects reading abilities, and particularly vocabulary learning. He highlights the study of Horst (cited in Grabe & Stoller, 2011, pp.105-6) as being of particular interest as she found that students not only experienced a significant increase in vocabulary, they did so regardless of the level of graded readers they read.

A Malaysian study at three rural secondary schools (Asraf & Ahmad, 2003, p. 99) revealed that, only one out of the three teachers believed in the importance of extensive reading at the start of the program. However, as they witnessed the improvement in attitude and motivation in their students, they began to realize its value. A similar study in Saudi Arabia by Faisal Al-Homoud and Norbert Schmitt (2009) was conducted in a similar environment as that of this study (e.g. A short-term class with students who had low English proficiency and did not have much experience or interest in reading books). The results showed that not only did the students who participated in the ER program score similarly on English proficiency post-tests as those in the intensive English studies group, but also their attitude towards English improved markedly.

Students using ER as a tool for language acquisition face many challenges. Although ER principles maintain that reading should be easy and enjoyable, many do not succeed in choosing books that fit these criteria. Claridge's (2011, pp. 185-6) analysis of student behavior when choosing graded readers shows that ones who are avid readers in their L1 tend to choose books that are below their perceived L2 proficiency, thus allowing them to enjoy the reading experience. However, those who did not engage in ER in L1 tended towards the 'no pain, no gain' philosophy and chose books that were beyond their ability, perceivably in hopes that the higher level would help

improve their L2 skills. Even though teachers should steer students towards reading books below their language proficiency level, as Macalister (2011) contends, many teachers are not familiar with research that exists in the area of ER, and often misguide their students.

3.2 Approach to using ER in Surugadai University's English II classes

After having reviewed studies in ER and being particularly influenced by the seminal work of Day and Bamford, Extensive Reading in the Second Language (1998), the instructor created an abbreviated approach for incorporating ER in English II based on the model of Day and Bamford's (2002) widely used Ten Principles of Extensive Reading.

The ten principles are as follows:

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available.
3. Learners choose to read what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. Reading speed is usually faster, rather than slower.
6. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
7. Reading is individual and silent.
8. Reading is its own reward.
9. The teacher orients and guides the students.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

All of the principles were followed, as described below, except for 4 and 8. Basically, as a small part of the whole program, students were not expected to read many books. However, each book that was read (three required for the term) was to be read at least three times each, with a hopefully increased speed each time. Most programs recommend three books per week, but, in reality, most students are able to read about one book a week (Grabe, 2012) and are able to gain sufficient vocabulary knowledge to progress steadily (Nation & Wang, 1999). Also, for this program,

reading was used as a springboard for writing and speaking tasks. So, the preparation and execution of these activities were required.

To follow these tenets as closely as possible, the instructor encouraged students to choose books from the lowest level for adult readers, and even recommended children's readers for those who had particularly low levels of vocabulary. Hu and Nation (2000) suggest that learners must know at least 98% of the words in a fiction text for unassisted understanding. Given this, students' first experience reading a book was particularly challenging: Students must find books that are both interesting and easy to read. For this to occur, a large collection of books is necessary.

In addition to simply reading, the audio collection in the LEC also offered students the opportunity to listen to professional recordings of the books. The Extensive Reading Foundation's "Guide to Extensive Reading" (2011) outlines the benefits of using audio with graded readers and suggests the following ways to do this:

Almost all graded readers come with audio recordings, some of which can be downloaded for free from the publisher's website, or they can be purchased. Some series may have a video accompanying the graded reader, too. The recordings are usually a very high quality and so students can listen-while-reading to help them enjoy the book. The recordings also help them to recognize the sound patterns, intonation and pronunciation as well and it is a good model for them to follow.

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To guide students in using the CDs in the LEC, specific tasks and suggestions were given (See Report 3).

The following is an outline of the three parts of the graded reader component to English II. Each section was completed over a 2-week period.

Report 1: Cengage Footprint Reading series book: The Future of a Village (2008)

All students purchased and read the same book, a "class reader", and engaged in

comprehension and expansion activities based on this reader. This first step to using books in the communicative classroom is a practice endorsed by the highly regarded scholar in reading in second language education, Dr. William Grabe (2012). Although this book was preselected for them, the instructor explained her rationale for choosing the book and gave them advice for when they select their own to read.

The first step in using the book was to have students practice predicting content from viewing the back and front cover. Then, background information about the geographical subject of the book, Essaouira, Morocco, and new vocabulary was introduced. They also viewed a photo-video made by the instructor and watched a video of traditional music from this region, a subject central to the topic of the story: Tourism booms and how they affect the culture and environment. After engaging in these pre-reading activities, students were assigned to read the book at home at least three times and prepare a report that would act as a support for giving an oral presentation about the book to a partner. The report consisted of three parts: (1) A graphic organizer that was to include simple drawings representing main parts of the story and to be used as a visual aid when retelling the story; (2) 'Story and Me' section which required students to reflect on the content of the story and express how it relates to their personal experience or an aspect of society; and (3) 'Recommendation' section where the students rank how strongly they would recommend this book to someone who has yet to read it and explain why.

Although the delivery of the presentation of this report was somewhat artificial in that it did not represent authentic communication as partners were already aware of the content of the story, the primary purpose was to acclimatize students to the process of using a book in class for communicative purposes (i.e. Select and preview a book, think about the content and preview unfamiliar vocabulary, read multiple times, create visual images to assist in remembering the content of the story, and connecting to it on a personal level). The presentations were very carefully organized and monitored. Movable desks allowed the students to shift them so that two rows of students faced each other. The instructor assigned A and B rows and had the As start at the same time. Once the As were finished, the B students completed an

evaluation of the presentation both in written and orally. Once the first student's presentation was completed, the partner did the same. Once everyone had completed this process, the B students stood up and shifted one seat ahead, with the first student moving to the end of the row. They repeated the activity, thus giving them a second experience presenting.

The instructor wandered around the classroom observing the progress of the students. Surprisingly, most students spoke only in English. They pointed to drawings in their graphic organizer and pictures in the book to facilitate the retelling of the story. Many were able to use proper inflection and emotion when voicing their opinion about the book. She also observed that partners sometimes asked for repetition or clarification. So, there was a fair amount of natural negotiation of meaning and communication taking place.

Report 2: A graded reader from the Language Laboratory collection in the Media Center

The students' second experience reading a graded reader allowed the freedom of choice from the large collection of readers in the Media Center, thus adopting Day and Bamford's (2002) Principle 2: "A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available", and Principle 3: "Learners choose to read what they want to read". As students were unfamiliar with this collection and in the strategies for choosing an appropriate book for their level and interest, the instructor first took class time to explain the her determined principles for effective book selection (i.e. Books that include no more than 2-3 unknown words per page. Books that looked interesting. Books whose stories they already know in Japanese. Graded readers as more appropriate than picture books for native English speaking children). She then escorted the students to the Language Laboratory in the Media Center, showed them the section and the various levels of books. She showed them several different kinds from Level A, books for beginners. Then, she stayed available for questions while they browsed and only let them leave the area to check out the book after showing it to her, telling her why they chose it and receiving her approval.

Before the next class, students were to read the book at least three times and engage in the same format report as they completed for the class reader (i.e. Graphic organizer, 'Story and Me', and their recommendation and reason why. See Appendix A). In the following class, students gave their presentations to two partners and engaged in both peer- and self-evaluation.

Report 3: A graded reader and CD from the collection in the LEC

For the third and final assignment, the students chose a book and CD from the LEC collection. Similarly to the Media Center report, students were escorted to the Language Center and shown the books. As these books are not available to be used outside the center, students were simply instructed on how to borrow the CD or CD-Rom and told to come back during their free time to read and listen to the book. Students were given a short amount of time to browse and ask questions. The report was similar, with the addition of a section for listening. Students were instructed to listen to 2-3 pages repeatedly, without looking at the words, and to write the words they could hear clearly and understand. Then, they were to listen to the same passage while reading the text and note the words or phrases that they could not hear easily. The procedure for giving and evaluating the oral reports was the same as with the first two.

4. Results and discussion

At the end of the academic year, just a few weeks after finishing the three reports, students were asked to fill in a questionnaire regarding their attitude towards these reports and their self-assessment on how they helped their English skills (See Appendix B). Their responses are indicators of their attitude towards reading books in English as well as book collection and book report section preferences.

4.1 Attitude and skills improvement

The first section of the questionnaire relates to attitude and self-evaluation of how much these tasks helped their English skills. The overall results show an extremely positive attitude. For each of the six statements, at least 76% of the respondents gave a score of four or above.

Of the six statements, the students ranked number six, recommendation of the usage of book reports in the following year, the highest. With number one being the highest, students' rank for this category was an average of 1.99 with only eight out of 91 ranking it four or less. This is a strong indicator that the students value this task as a meaningful and enjoyable component of the course. As students were required to think deeply about whether or not they would recommend the book they read to a classmate, they were used to thinking about recommendations. Therefore, it is likely that they took this question seriously as well and truly meant that it should be a part of the course. On the other hand, the statement that received the highest number of four or less responses was number four, improvement of speaking skills, with an average score of 2.77 and with 22 out of 91 giving it lower than average scores. Although the students engaged in this speaking task more meaningfully than other typical tasks, and seemed to enjoy it the most, many students still lacked in confidence. As Yamashita (2008) found in her one-semester study of extensive reading at a Japanese university, one semester is too short a period to show any significant improvement in other skills. Although this study is quite preliminary and did not quantitatively measure student proficiency levels, spoken exams given at the end of the spring semester and fall semesters showed a marked improvement and confidence on the part of the students' speaking ability. Although there were undoubtedly other tasks in the course that helped students' communication skills, including oral book reports in the fall term certainly benefited the students.

4.2 Favorite book report

In designing course content, it is important to address student preferences. It is not always advisable to completely adapt the program to their wishes, but knowing general predispositions to pedagogic practices helps guide the instructor in making informed decisions. More importantly, knowing why students feel as they do can assist the instructor in addressing possible problems and designing tasks. In any case, the more information one has, the better informed the teaching decisions can be.

For the use of graded readers, students by far (66%) preferred being able to choose their own readers among the collection in the Media Center. Secondly, at 25%, students favored the LEC readers. Only 9% stated that their favorite book and report was the class reader.

It is insightful to examine why these choices were made. Students' comments confirm more of the Day and Bamford's (2002) Ten Principles of Extensive Reading than the others. In particular, Principle 2, a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available, is best fulfilled in the Media Center collection as it is about ten times the size of the LEC collection. Nevertheless, many students also remarked that they were impressed and satisfied with the size of the collection in the LEC. So, 450 books seemed to be a sizable enough collection for roughly 90 students to use at once.

According to the comments, however, what students found more important was the availability of the books, an issue related to Principle 4, learners read as much as possible. Students were limited in the time they could spend reading the books in the LEC as compared to the Media Center. For one, the books could not be checked out, and the hours of the LEC were quite limiting at 9AM to 5PM during university operating days. Many students complained that they could not get to the center early enough, especially when they had 5th period and requested that the center remain open until at least 7PM. Even with this challenge, many students appreciated being able to listen to the story and commented that this activity helped their listening comprehension and pronunciation and intonation skills.

Another area that needs to be improved is the organization of the books in the LEC. Several students commented that it was easier to choose a book at their level in the Media Center as all of the beginner books were grouped together. On the other hand, to find a beginner level book in the LEC, a student must search through the books on the left side of each graded reader collection as they are organized with the lowest level on the left. If the organizers of the LEC do not want to mix the books in the series, one option would be to put color-coded stickers on the spines of the books

indicating their approximate level. An explanatory sign for student reference could be posted next to the bookshelves.

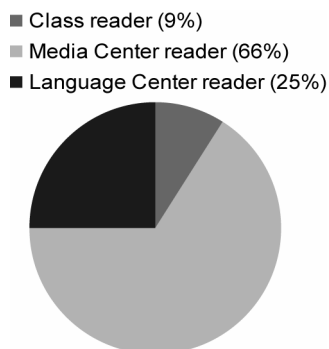


Figure 1: Preferred reader

Although the vast majority of students did not choose the class reader as their favorite reader, there were still quite a few positive comments related to its benefits. One student noted that the feeling of ownership was important to him/her. Another expressed his/her pleasure at not having to borrow the book. Having it long-term was convenient. Most poignant were the comments related to the ease with which they were able to understand this story as compared to the self-selected books. Of course, the instructor's guidance and explanations certainly aided the students in comprehension. Disregarding that support, a student said the English was simple and storyline interesting and easy to follow. This highlights the importance of carefully choosing a book for a class reader. The instructor chose *The Future of a Village* primarily because of its relevant content to the Tourism and Hospitality Program to which she belongs. Firstly, it's important for instructors to be enthusiastic about the materials and enjoy them themselves. This energy is apparent to students and can possibly help motivate and inspire them. Secondly, she was able to explain how content they are learning about in Japanese can be learned in simple English. She wanted the students to feel that English was both approachable and could be a real tool for their education rather than simply a subject they had to pass as a graduation requirement.

Most student comments written in Japanese and translated to English by the

instructor had been anticipated: Such as (1) There was a wide variety of books available in the Media Center; (2) I enjoyed listening to books; (3) Listening helped my comprehension; and (4) The stories were interesting and informative. Some particular comments, however, were insightful and should be seriously considered when judging the validity of using graded readers in communicative English classes. One student stated that, “I was able to understand the content of the story, not just the English.” This indicates that this student worked diligently in other tasks to understand the meaning and structure of sentences, but this was his/her first experience actually thinking of the message the language was conveying. Taking the study of English to this level is the main goal of English II. So, it can be said that if this is a feeling by even some of the students, the practice of using graded readers as a part of the course content is valuable.

Several students who chose the LEC as their favorite activity did so because they were grateful to have had the opportunity to learn about the center. Although incoming students are taken on a brief tour of the entire campus their first week of classes, there is most likely too much information at once for the students to process and most do not recall having visited the LEC at all. Even if they remembered that it existed, having an in-depth tour and explanation of the center with a task that requires them to return there on their own to employ the materials is quite necessary. As this was one of the goals the instructor had in mind when designing this task, the student feedback assures that this was achieved. In addition, when touring the students around the LEC, most of them expressed surprise that Surugadai University had such facilities and resources for their language studies. One student gasped and exclaimed that the center was, “Surugadai University’s best kept secret.” With the amount of resources put into the LEC and the potential benefits for the students, it would be most effective to incorporate this kind of active usage as part of English courses.

4.3 Favorite section of book report

The students’ responses to the question concerning the section of the book report and process that they most preferred showed a strong preference for presenting their

report to partners. When designing tasks, whether they be for oral or written production, it is important for the student to know who the audience will be and to be motivated to do their best to communicate effectively with them. Students also had a strong preference for the graphic organizer, summary and partner evaluation. As this was their first experience reading a book in English, many said that it was rather difficult, but the use of drawings to help them organize the story in their head helped them immensely. Many said they liked to draw, so this task was quite enjoyable as well.

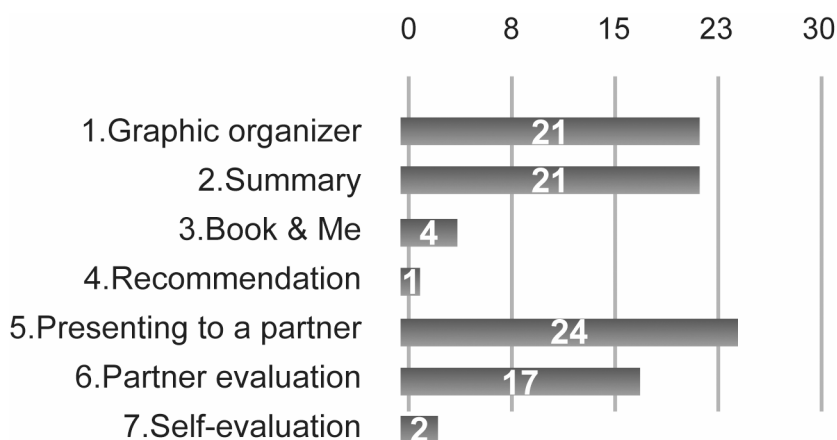


Figure 2: Preferred section of book report

In reviewing their comments, it is interesting to note that several students stated that by having a classmate evaluate them, they could better understand which parts of the story they did and did not know. These types of comments focus on communicating the content of a subject to another person as opposed to the typical self-consciousness concerning grammar and pronunciation. Another student stated that his partner's comments were constructive and helped him know exactly where he needed to make improvements. It is often said among instructors that students are shy and do not want to evaluate each other, or that students feel it is the responsibility of the instructor to evaluate them. With these reports, however, it is possible to overtly explain the process and necessity of peer-evaluation. The instructor firmly requested that students not just make general comments like

“Good job”, but think about specific areas that were strong (e.g. Your eye contact was good and helped me stay focused on what you were saying). or comment constructively on areas that could be improved (e.g. It would be helpful if you pointed to pictures in the book while explaining the story). Several students also commented that they learned how to give an effective presentation by listening to several classmates.

When looking at the lowest ranking areas, one can see a pattern of students valuing less components which require self-expression and reflection (i.e. ‘Book & Me’, ‘Recommendation’, and ‘Self-evaluation’). Students enjoyed explaining the content of the stories. A possible feeling of security may be important. Students, especially first year students who have yet to experience small seminar classes where discussions take place, may not feel comfortable thinking about the stories and relating them to their lives. Although the instructor values this reflective practice and explained to students that ‘reader response’ is a natural part of reading and communicating with others about books one has read, it might be better to omit these sections in the future.

4.4 Recommended changes

It is interesting to note that although the last question of the questionnaire requested that students recommend things that might be changed to improve the reports or process, the majority of the comments included the usage of highly positive words such as *fun, enjoy, confidence, easy, improve, joy, improved comprehension skills, improved communication skills, and satisfaction*. The main recommendations were that this practice be done for future students and that the reports remain the same. Several commented that it was meaningful and natural to communicate the content of a book to a classmate and that they felt that doing the report helped deepen their understanding of the book. Although this practice goes against the pure extensive reading guidelines of having reading be its own reward, the benefits of guiding students can be seen and have been validated in other studies (Hsui, 2000).

5. Conclusion

The results of this study show that English II students can and do benefit from reading graded readers as a part of the course requirements. As Matsuoka and Hirsh (2010) found in their study of vocabulary development through course book studies, for students to develop a sizable vocabulary, it is necessary to supplement courses with ER materials. This English II course attempted just that, and with apparent success as 87% of the students gave a higher than average score when asked if they prefer reading books to studying with a course book. These tasks were manageable, attainable, instructive, and, importantly, enjoyable. Overall, the students seem to benefit from these supplementary materials. There seemed to be no resentment on the part of the students. Quite to the contrary, this practice seemed to be one of their favorite activities in the entire year. Noteworthy as well, the instructor enjoyed the process and also demonstrated herself as a reader by sharing her graphic organizers of some graded readers and making specific recommendations of books, related movies and other interesting resources.

One difficulty the instructor faced was choosing an appropriate class reader—something challenging enough for all students and interesting enough to be able to talk about themes or content and guide the students through their first experience reading a book in English. In designing ER courses, a leading educator and researcher in reading, William Grabe (2012b), expressed his preference for class readers, and in particular Black Cat readers as they have a wealth of supplementary materials that can be exploited by instructors to address specific student needs.

Certain issues need to be addressed for the actual presentation of the reports. Firstly, the instructor found it beneficial for students to physically have the readers while presenting. For this to occur, students need to be able to check out books. When this study took place, there was a general consensus among librarians that duplicate copies of LEC readers not be ordered for the Media Center collection. However, since the audio component could only be included with LEC graded readers, copies of all the LEC books should be available for checking out in the Media Center.

Students like talking about stories. As the subjects in most communicative English textbooks focus on personal information, this shift may be both refreshing and reassuring for students. They do not have to worry about revealing private thoughts and, instead, can enjoy the content of interesting stories.

Day and Bamford (2002) provided the instructor with sound principles for establishing an ER program. Ten years later, she would like to present her proposed principles for integrating reading in the English II courses at Surugadai University.

1. Readers supplement the main course book.
2. The teacher demonstrates a love for reading.
3. Students read a class reader and practice comprehension and communicative tasks.
4. The teacher explains how to choose a graded reader.
5. The teacher explains the book report rationale and procedure.
6. The teacher and students visit and explore the ER collections on campus.
7. Students are given time in class to read.
8. Students are encouraged to read the same book multiple times outside of class.
9. Students prepare reports and practice outside of class.
10. Students present their reports to partners and give feedback.

This study calls for more collaboration among English instructors for a unified use of the graded readers and a continuation of this practice for 2nd year students. Some instructors doubt students' ability and willingness to engage in reading books. Some also express concern about a lack of class time to engage in such a program. However, this study shows the use of approximately five instruction hours out of 45 was sufficient to implement this program. As for student motivation and aptitude, given a supportive, non-threatening environment, students will participate, as the results of this study have shown. Lack of participation was a valid fear that the instructor shared as well. This study showed, however, that even the lowest level students in the lowest ranked course were able to complete these tasks at a basic level. More importantly, it was these students who expressed the greatest joy in having, after so

many years of failure in English classes, accomplished such a seemingly daunting task. A subtle shift in attitude and self-worth may affect these students in ways that go beyond the scope and aims of the Surugadai University English program.

The results of the study also suggest that the success of a graded reader program depends on several factors, among which are: How we are able to motivate the students to read; how the program is organized and implemented; and instructor attitude towards the program. Unless instructors believe that ER is beneficial in promoting English language development among their students, they are not likely to exert their efforts to make the program a success. Thus, these factors should be given careful consideration when planning for and implementing a shift towards a supplementary ER program.

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Appendix A: Sample book report and evaluation

Book Report

Title: _____ Name (romaji): _____

Author: _____ Name (English): _____

Publisher: _____ Student number: _____

Level: _____ Pages: _____ Day: _____ Period: _____

How many times did you read this book: _____

How long did it take each time? 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Graphic organizer of the story:

Use shapes, pictures and key words to represent the different parts of the book.

Summary of the story: Write the main ideas of what happened in the story.

Recommendation: Would you recommend this book to a friend?

Circle one: 1. Yes, very strongly. 2. Yes 3. Somewhat 4. Not really 5. No
6. No, not at all.

Why?

Listening

1. Listen to the first page without looking at the words. What words and phrases can you hear clearly?
2. Listen to the first page again while reading along. What words and phrases are you NOT able to hear clearly?

Teacher Evaluation

Points: _____/30

Graphic organizer: _____/10

Summary & Recommendation: _____/10

Classmate/Self evaluation: _____/10

Evaluation instructions:

Give a number score for each category.

1. Yes, very. 2. Yes 3. Somewhat 4. Not really 5. No 6. No, not at all.

Give a grade for the overall presentation.

A: Excellent B: Very good C: Average D: Needs improvement

Classmate Evaluation

Grade: _____

Name: _____ **Student number:** _____

_____ I was able to *understand* the report.

Comments:

_____ The report was *interesting*.

Comments:

_____ The report was *presented* well (speed, voice, eye contact, etc).

Comments:

SELF Evaluation

Grade: _____

_____ My report was easy to *understand*.

Comments:

_____ My report was *interesting*.

Comments:

_____ I *presented* my report well (speed, voice, eye contact, etc).

Comments:

Appendix B: Student questionnaire (Translation from Japanese)

Book Report Questionnaire

Part 1

Please write the appropriate number by each statement.

(1) Very much (6) Not at all

_____ 1. Doing the reports was a good way to study.

- _____ 2. I gained confidence in English thanks to the reports.
- _____ 3. My English reading skills improved by doing these reports.
- _____ 4. My English speaking skills improved by doing these reports.
- _____ 5. Compared to textbook studies, I prefer doing book reports.
- _____ 6. I would recommend that next year's students do book reports as well.

Part 2

Please answer each question and write detailed comments.

- _____ 1. My favorite book report (Circle one.)
 - 1. Book report 1: The Future of a Village
 - 2. Book report 2: Media Center library book
 - 3. Book report 3: Language Center library book

Why?

- _____ 2. My favorite part of the report was: 1. Graphic organizer; 2. Summary; 3. Book and me; 4. Recommendation; 5. Presenting to a partner; 6. Partner evaluation; 7. Self evaluation

Why?

- 3. I would recommend the following changes: