

Reflections on an Extensive Reading Program in a Small Academic Setting in Japan: Two Years on

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Two years ago, my colleagues and I began an Extensive Reading (ER) program at the small foreign language college in Tokyo at which we worked. The program began as an elective class for second year students and a required component of first year reading classes. Initially the students chose books from our small library. By the second year of the program running, ER was a requirement for all students. The process and reasoning behind the program was outlined in the article *Implementing an Extensive Reading Program and Library for ESL and EFL Learners in an Small Academic Setting within Japan* by Darrell Wilkinson (n.d.). In this article, I will summarize the program itself and give an overview of its success, based on frequent informal conversations with teachers and students and on my own experience of teaching on the program. I will then reflect on the issues and problems that we encountered. Finally, I hope to offer some advice and suggestions for those who are thinking of setting up a similar program or are currently engaged in one.

Summary of the Program

The program took place in two-year language college in Tokyo with around 90 students of various nationalities, of which approximately 50% were non-Japanese. The goals of the program were the following:

1. Give students a greater chance to receive graded input in English.
2. Improve students' attitude to and enjoyment of reading.
3. Improve students' reading comprehension and speed in terms of the types and amount of texts they may comfortably read.

To sell the program to the administration and students, vocabulary development and increased TOEIC reading scores were also cited as potential benefits.

The program consisted of a library of 150 graded readers, doubled in the second year of the program. At any one time, around 70-80 students were reading books, as a minority of students did not participate or attend the school regularly. The levels of students ranged from complete (as opposed to false) beginners to advanced readers. Similarly, the motivation levels of students varied considerably. Aside from a once-a-week elective class, the extensive reading classes took place as part of a 90-minute reading class once a week, altered to two 45-minute sessions twice a week in the second year. During this time, students changed their books, took part in "book talk", talking about what they were reading or had read, or read books silently. In their first year, students were able to read for around 30-40 minutes in class, while in their second year students read for 20 minutes or did all reading outside class.

Students were expected to read 10 books per 15 week semester for a pass (C) grade, 12 books for a B grade, and 13 or more books for an A grade. Students who read less than 10 books failed the reading course, which, as a required course, generally would result in failure of the year as a whole. In order to demonstrate that they had read the books, students discussed what they were reading in class, and completed short book reports comprising of multiple choice questions and a brief summary. Students were also responsible for keeping their own book sign-out sheet up to date, with the requirement that all books must be signed in by a teacher when returned. The penalty of losing or damaging a book was ¥1000 or replacement with the same book. During the first year, all classes

were run by the head teacher or by the author, whereas in the second year classes were taken over by teachers who were new to ER.

Overall Success of the Program

The program was viewed by the administration and teachers as an overall success; despite a number of teething problems or issues with individual students, the student body as a whole were able to substantially improve their enjoyment and apparent ease of reading. The success of the program can be considered in terms of three areas: average student reading amounts per semester, student progression through levels, and student attitudes to reading.

Average Student Reading Amounts per Semester

As mentioned above, when the program was begun in earnest for the new group of first year students, ER became a requirement. However, reading more than 10 books was not a requirement. Many students at the school are satisfied for a B or C grade for their classes, so a major question was would all students read 10 books, 13, or more? Interestingly, the result was that the vast majority of students *who participated* read 13 or more books. Some students did not participate in the program, but very few participating students (no more than 10%) read less than the minimum for a pass. A similar number read above 13 books, averaging around 15-20 books in a semester. In other words, students who participated in the program overwhelming focused on getting an A grade, with a small minority participating but not receiving an A. The implication is that, while many students were motivated by the desire to pass, a significant number were also motivated by the desire to read. There was no apparent difference detectable in the different levels of students, with students who were reading Level 4 books (around 1400 headwords) often reading as much or more than students reading Starter (around 250 headwords) readers. This suggests that the target of 13 books for an A was motivating for all levels. In this way, the program was a success, as students were certainly reading a large amount.

Student Progression through Levels

As might be expected, many students began the program with a lack of confidence and familiarity with English reading. In the first year, the majority were reading books in the 200-1000 headword range. A goal of the program was for students, over two years, to be able to move up levels, and become more confident with reading in general. The majority of students were successful in this; as a general rule of thumb, students moved up one level per semester. Some students began at the Starter level but ended reading Level 4 books; however, the majority reached Level 2 or 3. Problems with the level system, such as students moving too quickly through levels, will be mentioned later.

Student Attitudes to Reading

In our initial discussions with students, it came as no surprise that very few claimed to have read any books in English before; indeed, many claimed to rarely read books in their first language either. A primary goal of the program was for students to build confidence in their reading, as well as begin to enjoy reading in English. Many students did admit to enjoying reading in English; what we found interesting, however, what that on their end-of-year questionnaires a number of students wrote that they found reading in English “a little interesting”, but that their main motivation for reading was to improve their English. In private conversations, a particular class of highly-motivated students claimed to not enjoy reading very much, but could see it was very useful for their own development; as a result, these students read more than the required number of books. In contrast, many students in another well-motivated class said that they had begun to enjoy reading more for its own sake, with many students going well beyond the requirements of the course for

their own enjoyment. It appeared that group motivation was a big factor in how students viewed reading.

Reflections on the Program

While teachers considered the program to be a success, it was felt that there were a number of important insights gained throughout the initial two years of the program. Many of these insights relate to the prosaic day-to-day running of the program, and will be incorporated into the upcoming year.

Student Motivation

In a simplistic sense, two broad types of motivation were present in the program: intrinsic (students read for the pleasure and satisfaction of it) and extrinsic (students read because it is “instrumental to some consequence apart from the inherent interest in the activity” (Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001)).

One of the goals of ER is to encourage learners to read for intrinsic reasons, and to enjoy the reading for its own sake (Waring, n.d.). To this end, students were encouraged to choose books they enjoyed, and to return books that they did not. This itself was the cause of some problems, which will be discussed under the section on book choice. Students were also encouraged to recommend books to each other as part of the “book talk” phase of the lesson. For some students, this approach was successful, with students finding a new enjoyment in reading. Similarly, those who were already prolific readers in their L1 generally took well to the program. However, it was interesting to note that, among a minority of students who had read well above the requirements for an “A” grade, without exception they claimed to be motivated primarily by a desire to improve their English, rather than intrinsic enjoyment of reading. Thus it appeared that, among this small group, extrinsic motivation was a large factor. How much one can rely on learners’ own self-perceptions is debatable, of course.

Extrinsic motivation came in two main forms: students’ own desire to improve their reading or overall English proficiency, and the various strictures that teachers and the administration were able to put into place to encourage, cajole or force students to read. As mentioned above, many successful readers were motivated by a desire to improve their English as well as by the enjoyment of reading the stories. As Wilkinson (n.d.) mentioned, it was important to convince students of the value of ER. This did not prove difficult, as my experience is that the concept of *fluency development* as one of the Four Strands (Nation, 2007) makes sense to most learners, especially those in EFL contexts. However, a key problem was dealing with students who were motivated primarily by the desire to improve their English. These students were keen to learn new vocabulary and deal with ever more complex structures and discourse, and this tended to obscure the goal of become more fluent as a reader. These students were often keen to read above their level: intensive rather than extensive reading. This issue will be addressed in “Book Choice” below.

A second key aspect of extrinsic motivation came in terms of the rules and grading policy of the school. It was decided early on in the program that it was vital that as many students take part in the program as would be able to graduate the school. We did not want any students to succeed in other areas, but fail to graduate due to lack of participation in ER. Furthermore, more importantly, we did not want students who were not reading to demotivate other students. We also decided that, at least in the initial stages, it would be necessary to “push” some students into reading the minimum amount of books. In a sense, we viewed our task in the first semester to help students realize they could read 10 books in English in a semester. Arguably, this may be specific to the context in which the program was run; while most students were motivated and participated well in the classroom, there was much less motivation to do out-of-class homework. Therefore, while the idea of *making*

students read may not conform to all the principles of ER, we thought it was a necessary evil in order to get the program up and running.

In retrospect, a number of problems arose related to extrinsically motivating students. Firstly, there was some variation in teaching styles and in commitment and understanding of the principles of ER among the teachers, and as a result of this classes which had been motivated to read in one semester suffered a drop in reading amounts and enthusiasm in the following semester when the ER teacher changed. For example, during one semester, students who were perceived as underachieving were given page targets, such as 50 pages by the end of the week. The result of this was that the class as a whole managed to reach their number of books per semester; however, when the class was handed over to a teacher with a more “hands-off” approach, the class began to separate again into motivated and unmotivated students. While only a very small minority actually failed the ER portion of the course, it was my impression that, had the class not been motivated in the first semester, a larger number of students would have read less than the minimum 10 books a semester. In the second year of our program, we took a slightly more relaxed approach, with the result that particularly unmotivated students did indeed fail; however, as the percentage of these students was not high, it was impossible to discern any negative impact on the program as a whole. In short, a selective mixture of hands-off and hands-on seemed to work best, with a focus on making students very aware of grading and book targets, as well as motivating students with a positive attitude to ER and frequent book talk sessions to share books they had enjoyed (or not).

A further problem related to the disparity between page counts in different levels. It had been our initial supposition that a student reading longer level books would not take substantially more time than a beginner student reading much shorter books. This was not the case, at least for students reading books of 80-100 pages in length, in comparison with 20 or 30 pages. The majority of students did manage to read their required books, but it proved to be demotivating to read longer books with the knowledge they might receive equal credit for reading a book which was shorter. Very motivated students were perfectly capable of reading more than 13 longer books, but students found the target to be unfair. This proved to be a particular problem in the second semester of the program’s initial year, as the number of books was very limited, and students had no choice but to move to longer books. A possible solution for this will be discussed in “Further Improvements” below.

Book Choice

As mentioned above, one of the key issues with book choice was encouraging students to pick the correct level. This was related to teachers’ and students’ attitudes to reading, and in particular to learning vocabulary. Other issues included the limitations of a small library, and dealing with students who progressed beyond the level of graded readers.

There were two groups of students who we found problematic: those who wanted to read books that were too easy, and those who wanted to do the opposite. The first group was successfully dealt with by giving half or quarter credits for books that were manifestly below the students’ level. This was naturally not always easy to judge; students’ vocabulary level was assessed (Wilkinson, n.d.), but generally the students were trusted to choose appropriate books, slightly below their ordinary reading level. As a rule of thumb, if a student was reading a book two levels below that which their teacher would have expected them to read, they were penalized. Some students did persistently read books which were too easy, but it was our impression that this small minority did not affect the student body as a whole.

A second group of students were those with the attitude that learning must consist of the new, in particular new vocabulary and more complex language. This group was problematic because their attitudes corresponded with that of many teachers: that one will get more out of a book which is difficult and has a lot of new vocabulary. One of the crucial factors here was the education of teachers; as mentioned above, my experience is that most students readily grasp the concept of language input for fluency. In contrast, it took time to persuade teachers that reading books obviously *above* one's level was not productive in this particular strand of the course. We were able to convince teachers of this only through teacher-training workshops and frequent conversations. In retrospect, however, the concept of reading extensively and for fluency needed to have been better explained to teachers from the outset.

As a small school, the limited number of books proved to be one of the biggest problems for the program. In the first year, we had only around twice as many books as students. This resulted in most students reading all the books in their level, and reading books because they were of an appropriate level rather than interesting. In the second semester, we doubled the number of books again. This was sufficient for most learners, and had the result that students were generally able to read what they wanted, as well as a few books outside their usual area of interest. I would argue this is an appropriate balance. A minority of students, however, progressed beyond the highest level of the readers (around 2,500 headwords). An *ad hoc* solution we adopted was to allow students to choose their own ungraded readers; a credit value was then assigned by the teacher based on the number of pages. For example, one advanced Russian student who was reading the Harry Potter series was given two or three credits per book. The only drawback we found to this system was that some lower level students understandably wanted to read Harry Potter too, for example; it was up to the class teacher to persuade them to continue with graded readers.

A final insight we gained in terms of selecting books ourselves was that it was better to have as many different titles as possible; initially, we had supposed that it would be best to have several copies of each book to enable students to recommend and read the same books. However, it became apparent that, due to our small library size, it was much more important to have as much variety as possible.

Dealing with Academic Dishonesty

One of the obvious problems with ER is that it is hard to prove students have read the books. We opted for a book report and book talk system, which has the advantage that it produces at least some proof. It has the disadvantage, however, that it is fairly easy to cheat, and to claim to have read a book one has not. We decided to use a trust system; as ER was not a huge part of students' grade, students who did not read the books would primarily be hurting themselves. There was a danger, however, that a minority of students cheating would demotivate honest students. A simple and successful strategy that we used was an occasional brief interview. As our student body was small, this was achievable. When students returned books, they were required to get a teacher's signature. At times when students had read a book suspiciously quickly, or it was suspected that students were not reading (or simply randomly), the teacher would ask a few simple questions. For example:

1. What happens at the end?
2. What is happening in this picture? (Many readers have illustrations of main plot points).
3. Who was Peter? What happened to him?
4. Why did Mary die? (Mary did not necessarily die, or even may have not been a character in the book).

Although many students were unable to answer in any detail, it was usually easy to spot any students who had not read the books. These offenders were told to go back and read the book again. Naturally some cheating will have escaped notice, but again it was felt that this was inevitable.

Lost and Damaged Books

In our first year of the program, two or three books were lost or damaged and were replaced by the students. However, a major issue arose at the end of the semester: some students who had left the school, and whose attendance was poor towards the end, did not return the books they had borrowed. At the end of the program's first year, a small but noticeable number of books were missing. It proved to be a substantial task to contact these students and have them return the books or pay for the loss. Therefore, at the beginning of the second year of the ER program, we drafted an ER "contract" for students. This explained the penalties for losing or damaging books, the maximum borrowing time and grades. We also made sure that all students who had had a book for more than two weeks were asked to show it to their teacher and return it within the week. This proved to be more successful; however, unfortunately it was inevitable that a few books went missing. Therefore, it became a primary responsibility for ER teachers to make sure no books went astray.

Future Improvements

The program could be much improved by a better way of keeping track of books; instead of the personal sign-off sheet (see Wilkinson, n.d.), a computer system would help teachers better determine which books are overdue, and get in touch with these students more easily. Current administrative constraints will likely prevent this from being implanted, however we will continue to look for alternatives. Secondly, a system such as Moodle Reader (<http://www.moodlereader.org>) would be a more reliable way of checking students are actually reading, instead of book reports. Again, it may be difficult to implement this type of computer-based system due to the lack of available computers during ER class times.

However, it is certainly possible to make improvements in the grading policies and how book reports are dealt with. Firstly, from the upcoming academic year we will introduce a credit system based on page counts and levels, rather than number of books alone, similar to the Accelerated Reader system used at Kyoto Sangyo University (Robb, n.d.). This would mean that students who are reading longer books will not be discouraged by the higher page counts. Secondly, teachers can be encouraged to use a wider variety of techniques to check students are reading and give them a chance to share books they enjoy. An example of this would be short presentations, posters or role plays in class which could be used instead of a book report. These activities should be brief (Day & Bamford, 2000), but can be communicative and enjoyable.

Finally, one of the problems we encountered was the second year, "reading fatigue". This was due in part to the limited size and scope of the library; specifically, the fact that all titles were books and the vast majority were fiction. With a few exceptions, all belonged to the Cambridge and Oxford series. A future possibility would be to find a wider variety of materials to enable students to read for a wider variety of reasons, such as information gathering (Waring, n.d.).

Conclusion

Although there were a number of important constraints on the program, it was a success. I would argue that it had a significant impact on the motivation and overall achievement of the students as a whole. The key problems we faced were related to motivating learners and dealing with a mixture of motivation levels in class. We also had to work around a very limited budget and library of books. It was important to provide clear goals, deadlines and obligations to students, as well as educating

both teachers and students on the benefits and best way of going about extensive reading. I hope that the success of this program demonstrates that, with a small amount of materials and a minimum of books, it is possible to conduct a successful ER program within the constraints of a small academic context.

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