Two key issues to consider in the design of an effective ER program: Self-selection and integration

The discovery of research indicating widespread support for the effectiveness of Extensive Reading (ER) was a turning point in the author's search for a means to raise Japanese university students' English proficiency. However, discussions of variation in ER course structure to accommodate differing learner needs were almost absent from the literature, and poorly supported claims and biases were common. To begin filling this void, a series of exploratory studies was set up by the author over the past decade to investigate how students would respond to, and learn from, the reading of self-selected, group, and class readers. Based on this research, the author encourages ER practitioners to carefully consider their goals in designing ER programs, and focuses on self-selection and integration as examples of often overlooked factors that should be considered by those who are similarly seeking input rich methods to meet their learners' needs. The paper concludes with suggestions on the directions that ER research could take.

多読の効果が広く支持されたことを示す研究に出会ったことが、著者にとって日本の大学生の英語力の向上に役立つ方法を探す上での転機となった。しかしながら、一人ひとりの学習者のニーズに合わせるように、多読の授業の種類を論じていくことは先行研究にはなく、根拠が微弱な意見や偏見が多く見られた。この空白を埋めるべく過去10年間、どのように学生がリーディング教材（自主選択したもの・グループやクラスで選択したもの）に反応するのか、そしてどのように学ぶのか について多岐にわたる調査を行ってきた。この研究を基にして、著者は、多読を実践する教師が、そのプログラムを構築するにあたり目標設定を注意深く行うよう促している。また、学習者のニーズに合うようにインプットの多い方法を模索している 教師が見過ごしやすい点 の例として自主選択と統合された使用法に焦点を当てている。最後に、多読に関して今後どのような方向に研究が行われていくべきかという提案を行う。

Rory Rosszell
Tohoku University

A SEARCH THROUGH the Extensive Reading (ER) literature reveals a focus almost exclusively on programs in which learners read self-selected titles—usually with few or no follow-up activities. Unlike Harold Palmer, the originator of the term *Extensive Reading*, who had advocated a "multiple line approach" (1921/1964, p. 111), many more recent proponents, seemingly in reaction to a predominance of heavily teacher-controlled reading classes, and much under the influence of Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (e.g., Krashen, 1989), have redefined ER as an isolated activity. As a consequence, and despite Palmer having emphasised that the benefits of doing large quantities of enjoyable, level-appropriate reading could most effectively be realized through integration with other more language-focused activities, any reading-related activities beyond *pleasure reading* (a term popularised by Krashen, among others) have come to be regarded as suspect, counter-productive, or even painful (Krashen, 2004).

Day and Bamford (1998), in their widely cited book, list self-selection as a defining characteristic of ER, and discourage the use of follow-up activities. However, despite the large amount of anecdotal evidence, there is little empirical evidence in the L1 or L2 literatures to support either of these biases, or the wide range of learning benefits which it has been claimed that learners derived from engaging in their version of ER (for reviews, see Horst, Cobb, & Meara, 1998; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006). To begin to fill this void, the author began investigating the strengths and weaknesses of self-selected and class readers, as well as a combination of both approaches (Rosszell, 2000), and later, also those of group readers—which offer a middle ground between self-selected and class readers (see Rosszell, 2002).

Bamford and Day appear to have more recently softened their stance against follow-up activities, and have recently published a volume of ER-related activities (Bamford & Day, 2004). These are very welcome developments, and ones that will help to rectify the bias evident in their earlier writings (2002). However, Day (2003) continues to insist on a version of ER that, by definition, excludes class readers. Prowse (2002) on the other hand, includes class readers in his discussion of ER and regards follow-up activities as a suitable complement, but he does not appear to support their use with self-selected titles.

This paper is based on the author's experiences with Japanese EFL students in university contexts, with levels ranging from elementary to advanced, and in elective as well as compulsory courses with between 15-35 students. Although the focus of this paper is on ER, the issues discussed are equally relevant to the use of graded reader tapes/CDs (i.e., Extensive Listening) or the simultaneous use of graded readers and tapes/CDs (see, for example, Brown, Waring, & Donkaewbua, in press).

Table 1 includes the three approaches that the author has used, as well as his evaluation of those features that instructors should consider in deciding which approach might be most suitable for their particular learners. Each feature will be discussed in turn, moving across the columns from left to right.

Individual pace

Self-selection is often portrayed as being the only way to allow readers to read at their individual paces, but when the reading is done outside of class, all three approaches easily accommodate individual reading speeds and preferences. Learners are given ample time to complete their reading, and given that many instructors using a self-selected approach impose minimum reading targets (e.g., pages per week, or books per semester), the pressure on students to read is similar.

Reading quantity

However, in terms of quantity, those reading self-selected titles may spend more time reading (i.e., rather than writing, or studying vocabulary—although some teachers also require students to write short reports on self-selected titles), and the self-selected approach offers the advantage of allowing individuals to read as much (or, possibly, as little) as they wish. Recommended quantities range from 300,000 words during the first year (Furukawa, 2006), to about one graded reader per week (Hill, 1992), to Hedge's (1985) finding that even 1 hour every week or two is enough to exert a positive effect (p.79). While reading in quantity is no doubt the central purpose in any ER program, the research has yet to establish if there is a threshold level below which learning benefits become negligible.

Table 1. The relative advantages and disadvantages of self-selected, group, and class readers

Approach	Individual Pace	Reading Quantity	Reading Quality	Preferred Titles	Support	Vocabulary Enrichment	Discussion Quality	Cost
Self-selected[a]	++	++	+	++	-	+	+	++
Group[b] Readers	+	+	++	+	+	++	++	+
Class[c] Readers	+	+	++	-	++	++	++	-

[a] – each student selects the titles (s)he reads

[b] – students select and read the same title in groups of about four

[c] – the teacher selects the titles and each is read by the entire class

'-' = not so good, '+' = better, '++' = best

Reading quality

Hill (1992) argues that to maximise language development, reading quality is no less important than reading quantity, and that this is best achieved through the use of class readers. Through a cycle of reading, vocabulary study, writing, and discussion, learners increase the quality of their reading and gain a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for the characters and events in the story, as well as for the language and its uses. Although the author has used this integrated approach in combination with self-selected readers, because students often read titles which are unfamiliar to their group-mates, and possibly the teacher as well, they do not receive the same level of in-class support, and therefore tend to find the discussions more challenging. Consequently, while an option for higher-level students, an integrated, self-selected approach is less suitable for lower-level students.

Preferred titles

Interestingly, in the research conducted by Rosszell (2002), it was found that the ratings that students gave to self-selected titles were often lower than those given to class readers. Even with clear guidelines for selecting interesting books, and teacher guidance, there was no guarantee that students would enjoy the books they self-selected, and although students were always encouraged to stop reading books they weren't enjoying, once started, many tended to finish reading them anyway. It also soon became clear that regardless of the quality of the plot, character development, and so forth, a major consideration in the ratings Japanese students assign to the readers, and one that is often not initially evident to them, is whether the story has a happy ending. Even a book like *Two Lives* (Cambridge University Press), a love story with a happy ending in which the main characters get married at the end, receives some negative reviews because the woman jilted her former fiancé. Any killing, or the inclusion of unpleasant or immoral characters, also generally results in lower ratings.

Another seldom discussed aspect of self-selection is that most learners like to tread on familiar ground and often do not read the variety of materials that Day and Bamford (2002, p. 8) recommend. Even though the selection of non-fiction titles is limited, few students read those which are available, and consequently, as Gardner's (2004) analysis of L1 children's narrative and expository reading materials clearly shows, many readers are only exposed to a limited range of vocabulary and expressions in their reading. In contrast, class and group readers that are selected by the teacher can help to mitigate this problem, and can in addition introduce learners to enjoyable genres of writing to which they might otherwise remain unexposed.

Support

Through reading books as a class or in groups, many of the difficulties inherent in supporting learners who are each reading self-selected books can be overcome. The less confident and/or less proficient learn from the more proficient (e.g., during the discussions), and the teacher can address commonly observed problems. If, for example, students are confused by events or language in the story, they come to class knowing that they can seek clarification. This opportunity provides not only psychological support, but helps to enhance comprehension and enjoyment. Similarly, by knowing the words to which learners will be exposed in the story, the instructor can anticipate potential vocabulary problems, and select words on which to elaborate. In addition, given that vocabulary development is commonly a priority among students, the support learners provide to each other in class enables them to read books at a slightly more challenging level than they could handle on their own, thereby increasing the potential for vocabulary and language development.

Vocabulary enrichment

Through being able to repeatedly hear and use (new) words, the interaction afforded by an integrated approach provides many opportunities for vocabulary enrichment. It provides opportunities for context-based vocabulary study, and as mentioned previously, it enables the instructor to focus on, or assign for study, words to which the learners are being regularly exposed in meaningful contexts.

As a follow-up to word study (self-selected or assigned), discussions of word meanings and usage (in pairs or small groups) enable learners to gain insight from each other, and as a result to become better able to comprehend, retain, and use the words (Stahl, 1999). In addition, through using words orally or in writing, learners develop their vocabulary skills (Joe, 1998; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). (For empirical evidence to support the role that complementary intensive vocabulary study can play in the development of knowledge of word meanings and usage, see Rosszell (2006).)

Discussion quality

In the author's experience, not only does the study, use, and discussion of new words enhance vocabulary development, it also increases both the quantity and the quality of the discussions of the readers. Learners become more confident and successful in expressing their opinions, have opportunities to use the words they have learned, and because they have all read the same passage, they can more easily help to correct each other's misunderstandings—in English!

In contrast with self–selected readers, which even intermediate level learners can find difficult to clearly describe without much support from their groupmates (see *Reading quality* in this article), and which often result in long silences and/or one person doing most of the talking, the support that group members offer each other in the discussion of group and class readers often results in lively discussions. An infectious enthusiasm spreads within groups, and students regularly write on end-of-course questionnaires that this is the most enjoyable part of the class. In addition to the language learning they derive from the discussions, they enjoy hearing their groupmates' opinions and as a result frequently develop lasting friendships.

Cost

The cost of purchasing graded readers can be substantial—especially when buying class sets. Lower level books are cheaper but one can expect to spend an average of about ¥600-700 per book. The author set up a library of 400 titles spread over the upper seven EPER levels and purchased a total of 11 class sets (30 copies of each) spread over the top four levels. On a limited budget, and especially when there exists a wide range of levels within individual classes, buying individual titles is no doubt the better choice. However, as one comes to identify generally popular titles, get more funds, and more precisely identify learners' needs, for the reasons mentioned previously, ER practitioners are encouraged to begin experimenting with a more integrated approach using group or class readers. With a little experience or preliminary research the selection of group and class sets can be roughly matched to the level of the learners—although class readers are no doubt better suited to streamed or more homogeneous classes.

Future research

A review of the research makes it clear that we have a long way to go in developing a reliable research base that identifies and quantifies the language learning benefits that learners derive from engaging in ER. To gain further insight into the benefits of a more integrated approach (as advocated in this paper), the literature on Literature Circles is no doubt a promising direction in which to look. It is unfortunate that despite the research in L1 contexts over the past decade (e.g., Daniels, 2002), very little has been published about their use in ESL and EFL contexts (but see McQuillan & Tse, 1997; and Furr, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

Much of the ER research that has attempted to quantify learning outcomes has investigated vocabulary acquisition and has unhelpfully focused on a crude distinction between incidental and conscious learning. A way forward would be to shift the focus of ER research to identifying those aspects of language learning which develop incidentally, those which benefit from conscious attention, and if and at what level of proficiency the focus should shift from one to the other. With more empirical research of this kind we could begin to understand the effect of different combinations of activities on particular aspects of language acquisition.

The author's research has, for example, shown very clearly that supplementing a cycle of reading and discussion with vocabulary study, results in superior and sustained knowledge of word meanings as well as their use (Rosszell, 2006). Although the demonstration of such knowledge on written tests is a step in the right direction, further research will be necessary to determine the extent to which learners actually use the words in their discussions, and the kinds and sequences of activities that will maximise the transfer of such knowledge. In this vein, it is encouraging to see a growing number of carefully controlled studies which examine the development of specific aspects of vocabulary knowledge (Brown et al., in press; Horst, 2005; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Rosszell, 2006; Waring & Takaki, 2003). To build on these studies, we need further studies in which potentially confounding variables are controlled for, and which seek to identify those aspects of language that can more efficiently be acquired with some form of supplementary conscious learning.

Conclusion

In this paper ER practitioners have been urged to be sceptical of the bias towards self-selection and against integration which exists in much of the ER literature, and to (re)consider the pros and cons of the use of self-selected, group, and class

readers with an open mind—especially considering that much of the recent research on L2 vocabulary acquisition within a reading context points towards the greater effectiveness of an integrated approach (Nassaji, 2003; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999; for a counter-example, see Mason, 2004). Before any decisions are made, the goals of the program as well as those of the learners need to be carefully considered. Only then can an ER program that incorporates those elements that are likely to lead to the achievement of those goals be designed.

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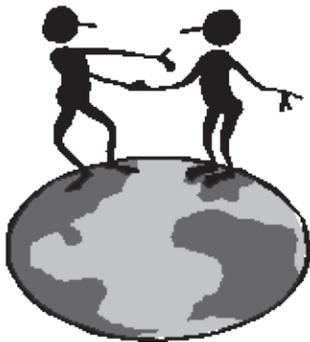
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Rory Rosszell has been teaching in Japan for the past 16years and his main interests include classroom-based research on content-based language teaching, Extensive Reading, and second language vocabulary acquisition. He can be contacted at <rosszell@he.tokoku.ac.jp>.