

〈研究ノート〉

Introduction of Extensive Reading to Japanese University Students: A Case Study

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Abstract

This exploratory study investigated the effectiveness of extensive reading (ER) on the development of Japanese university students' reading rate and their beliefs and attitudes towards reading English texts. In the second semester of 2010, ninety-five Japanese university students read graded readers outside the class and submitted weekly reports online for four months. Pretests and posttests of reading rates were administered according to their reading levels. Questionnaires on the participants' beliefs and attitudes towards reading English texts were also given. *T*-tests were conducted to compare the means of the reading rates and questionnaire items. The results did not show a statistically significant improvement in their reading rate. However, we were able to identify a significant increase in the participants' beliefs about their ability in reading fluency through ER.

Key Words: extensive reading, reading rate, learner beliefs, learner attitudes

1. Introduction

Reading fluency

Developing reading fluency is one of the important goals of English education in Japan. The rapid growth of information technology has made access to abundant information on the internet possible and people are exposed to more global business and personal communication. Not only English literacy but also the ability to process a greater amount of English information at a fast rate (reading fluency) is required more than ever.

According to Wolf and Katzir-Cohen (2001), a common understanding of the elements of fluency is “accuracy” and the “speed factor.” However, the six years of English education in Japanese secondary schools focuses on “accuracy” mostly. Learners are trained to read carefully and slowly while translating rather difficult reading materials into Japanese. One of the reasons to prioritize “accuracy” over “speed” is the standardized university entrance examination, which generally measures accurate understanding of English by allocating enough time to read the text repeatedly. As a result, fluent reading training has not been the center of attention in Japan (Yamashita, 2008) and some learners develop negative feelings toward reading in English, such as feelings of difficulty, resistance, or dullness.

Under such educational circumstances in Japan, the university seems to provide more flexible learning environment to develop learners' reading fluency and positive attitudes toward reading. However, it has been reported that Japanese universities have been facing some difficulties in English education due to students with diversified proficiency in recent years. This is especially true in non-English-major students' classrooms. The question is how we can help students improve their reading fluency under such conditions.

Extensive reading

Grabe and Stoller (2002) claim that "most L2 readers are simply not exposed to enough L2 print (through reading) to develop fluent processing"(p.47). In order to increase the amount of L2 input and to improve learners' attitudes toward reading in English, extensive reading (ER) has been reported as one of the most successful ways. According to Day and Bamford (1998), the main goal of ER is developing fluency, that is, rapid access to known L2 words through repeatedly encountering them. Research investigating the benefits of ER in EFL contexts show that ER improves various aspects of EFL readers' reading skills such as reading fluency, especially reading speed and comprehension (Iwahori, 2008; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Nakanishi & Ueda, 2011; Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010; Robb & Susser, 1989), reading comprehension (Mason & Krashen, 1997; Robb & Susser, 1989; Yamashita, 2008), and vocabulary knowledge (Day, Omura & Hiramatsu, 1991).

Studies on learners' reading rate

Despite the great number of positive reports on the effectiveness of ER, there are few studies, if any, which investigate the relationship between ER activity and a change in the reading rates of Japanese EFL students. Among the few studies investigating the relationship between ER and reading rate, Iwahori (2008) examined the effectiveness of ER on reading rates of Japanese high school students. Thirty-three students were provided with graded readers and comic books to read 28 books for 7 weeks. Pretests and posttests of reading rates and language proficiency were administered and a *t*-test was used to compare the means of the rates and language proficiency within groups. Results indicated that ER is an effective approach to improve students' reading rates and general language proficiency. Robb and Susser (1989) tested two groups of English major Japanese university students who experienced 10 months of ER (experiment group) and who did not experience any ER activities (control group). They found that the reading speed of the experiment group became significantly faster than that of control group.

These studies provide some useful information on how ER provides more L2 input, which, as a result, promotes learners' reading rates. However, the participants of these studies are high school students and English major students, who, we can assume, are usually within a similar

level and have more English input outside of the class. It still remains unknown the effectiveness of ER on non-English major students with diversified proficiencies and yet have little English input.

Studies on learners' beliefs and attitudes toward reading

Another benefit of ER is to improve learners' beliefs and attitudes towards reading in English. Studies show that learners who experience ER become more positive and eager about reading English texts (Apple, 2005; Camiciottoli, 2001; Macalister, 2008), which indicate that ER may have something to do with lowering learners' affective filters. For example, Macalister (2008) examined attitudes towards ER and the reading ability of 18 ESL students under a four-month pre-university study EAP program. The students read approximately 16 to 17 hours in the class throughout the program. Under such circumstances, the students showed positive attitude towards the loss of teacher-centered class time and the certain time allocated to ER in class.

These studies all show how effective ER is in developing learners' reading rates, degree of comprehension of the reading text, and positive attitudes towards reading. The results are encouraging for English instructors. However, we must humbly admit that the impact of ER on fluency development has not been well-established empirically as Grabe (2009) explains and the impact of ER on EFL learners with different levels is one such case. There has been no study examining the effectiveness of ER according to learners' reading levels as far as the authors are aware of. If there is a difference in the effects of ER according to reading ability in English, the results of the study should provide us with pedagogical insights into when to introduce ER, how long the learners should be engaged in ER, and the most effective teaching method.

In order to empirically understand how effective ER is in classrooms with a wide range of English proficiency, we investigated non-English-major university students who take so-called *general* (classes vary according to instructors discretion) English classes. This study explores the possibilities of difference in effectiveness of ER with respect to learners' reading rate as a part of reading fluency as well as their beliefs and attitudes towards reading English texts. We have the two following research questions which we attempt to answer:

1. Are there differences in effectiveness of ER among different levels of learners in terms of reading rate?
2. Are there differences in change of beliefs and attitudes toward reading English texts according to different reading levels?

2. Method

Participants

The participants for this study were 95 students (18 males and 77 females) at a Japanese university who had an upper-beginner to intermediate level of English. They were first year students majoring in intercultural studies and child education. All the students had studied English for at least 6 years during junior and senior high schools in Japan. The participants took at least one other general English class during the semester¹ while this study was conducted. Among the 95 students, one student studied abroad for 3 years while in high school. Also, there were 18 students who did not take the pretest and/or posttest, or did not read more than half of their required assignments and there were five students whose tests were incomplete. As this study eliminated them (the latter mentioned 24 students) from the list of participants, the total number of participants included in the analysis became 71. However, we had 76 qualified participants for the analysis of the questionnaires.

Materials

A pretest-posttest design was adopted. A reading test was employed as a set of pretest and posttest. A questionnaire was also given to the participants with a set of pretest and posttest. The reading test was employed to examine their reading rates. There were five kinds of reading tests each time, matched to participants' reading levels. Before the pretest, participants were given a set of reading material to ascertain which reading level they were in at that point. Then the participants self-reported their reading level according to the criteria that Nation (1990) suggested, which means more than 98% of vocabulary in the book should already be acquired. Self-reporting showed they were divided into five different levels: level 1 to level 5². The number of participants in each level was as follows: 29 in Level 1; 20 in Level 2; 11 in Level 3; 8 in Level 4; 3 in Level 5. Then the participants took a pretest that matched their starting levels from the set of tests. We used the Oxford Bookworms series from the Starter level to Level 4³. The time limit for the test was 20 minutes. First, students read the story for one minute and then marked the one-minute point on the text with a pencil for later reference. Then they continued to read the story another 19 minutes (as far as they could read) and wrote down the numbers of the words they read in the first one minute (wpm: words per minute) as well as the total number of words read within 20 minutes.

We recorded two types of reading rate because we assumed the longer the time spent for reading, the more authentic the participants' reading would be. Although reading an entire book is recommended in terms of authenticity of reading (Rasinski, 2003), 20 minutes was the longest we could afford in a 90 minutes class period, while still fulfilling the other class goals.

The questionnaires were given to explore the participants' beliefs and attitudes towards reading English texts as well as their learning history. A total of 16 Likert scale items were

included in the pre-instruction questionnaire and 16 Likert scale items in the post-instruction questionnaire (6 scales: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *somewhat agree*, 5 = *agree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). Four of the items focused on participants' beliefs and attitudes with respect to reading fluency. It took approximately five minutes to complete each questionnaire.

Procedure

The extensive reading activity for the present study was conducted during a 15-week course. In the first two weeks, the participants self-evaluated their reading level, took a pretest and the questionnaire, as is explained in the previous section. During the course, the participants read at least one graded reader a week outside of class. Minimum requirement for the semester was to read 12 books. We followed the ten principles of ER that Day and Bamford (1998) provided⁴. Students chose whichever books they wanted to read, based on their reading level, from the library collection of 4,423 graded readers (1,091 titles). Then, they submitted weekly reports on Moodle, an online course management system. The reports were written in Japanese. In class, they shared their reports using a projector and screen every week. Every three weeks they also had a series of activities based on the books they read. The activities included, for example, summarizing the story and writing a comic strip. These assignments ensured that the participants read a book every week and understood the contents. A posttest to measure their reading rate as well as a questionnaire to investigate the beliefs and attitudes were given in the 14th week. The 15th week was devoted to a regular final examination based on the course book they used in the class. They were also told how many words they read during the course (see Table 1 for the average number of words they read according to the levels).

Analysis

After the pretests and posttests were administered, a *t*-test was conducted to compare the means of the rates and reading proficiency within groups. We also conducted a *t*-test to see the difference in the participants' beliefs and attitudes towards reading English texts before and after the instruction.

3. Results

Improvement of reading rates among different self-reported reading levels

The first research question is to see if ER is effective for all levels of learners or are there differences in effectiveness among the levels of learners in terms of reading speed. *T*-tests were computed in order to examine the differences between the reading rates of the pretests and posttests according to reading levels. The result of the *t*-tests shows that the differences were not significant for all levels as well as two types of wpm scores (first one minute and twenty

minute scores). However, the following average reading rate increased: 20 minutes wpm of level 1, both first one minute wpm and 20 minutes wpm in level 2, first one minute wpm of level 3 and 4, and both first one minute wpm and 20 minutes wpm in level 5. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the reading rates of pre- and post-instruction and the average numbers to words the participants read in each level.

Table 1

Reading rates of pre- and posttest and the number of words read (N=71)

Level	N		1 min wpm		20 mins wpm		Average number of words read
			Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	
1	29	<i>M</i>	108.21	90.07	79.34	81.87	35,873.41
		<i>SD</i>	19.39	26.02	6.76	13.74	
		<i>High</i>	156.00	150.00	104.93	119.25	
		<i>Low</i>	78.00	57.00	65.35	56.90	
2	20	<i>M</i>	115.70	126.15	95.22	103.19	75,102.52
		<i>SD</i>	26.89	25.43	16.35	23.75	
		<i>High</i>	162.00	179.00	126.60	163.95	
		<i>Low</i>	49.00	70.00	64.10	47.75	
3	11	<i>M</i>	89.09	110.73	89.62	83.71	81,997.73
		<i>SD</i>	32.99	34.13	33.40	30.30	
		<i>High</i>	167.00	158.00	137.15	140.00	
		<i>Low</i>	44.00	59.00	35.55	41.35	
4	8	<i>M</i>	112.75	138.63	97.98	90.73	120,055.38
		<i>SD</i>	19.20	27.85	25.97	20.03	
		<i>High</i>	145.00	178.00	146.85	121.40	
		<i>Low</i>	96.00	98.00	58.60	56.50	
5	3	<i>M</i>	102.33	125.33	93.90	94.92	149,696.67
		<i>SD</i>	7.77	14.47	19.00	25.09	
		<i>High</i>	111.00	142.00	109.10	120.00	
		<i>Low</i>	96.00	116.00	72.60	69.85	

Improvement of beliefs and attitudes towards reading English texts

The second research question is to investigate whether there are differences in improvement of beliefs and attitudes toward reading English texts according to different reading levels. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of changes in participants' beliefs and attitudes toward reading English. *T*-tests were computed in order to examine the differences between the

beliefs and attitudes toward reading English texts. The result shows that there are significant differences in item 2 ($t(75) = -5.47, p < 0.01$), item 3 ($t(75) = -2.99, p < 0.01$), and item 4 ($t(75) = 4.03, p < 0.01$).

Their beliefs and attitudes towards reading English texts changed for the positive. In other words, compared to before engaging in ER, they feel they don't have to translate the text into Japanese while reading, enjoy reading English texts, feel their reading rate has increased, and feel less resistance toward reading English texts.

Table 2
Beliefs and attitudes toward reading English (N=76)

Item	Pre-ER		Post-ER	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I enjoy reading English.	4.09	1.12	4.18	0.88
2. I have no resistance towards reading English texts.	3.41	1.22	4.00	0.97
3. I can read English texts fast.	2.47	0.96	2.77	0.89
4. When I read English texts, I translate them into Japanese	4.42	0.99	3.86	1.86

Table 3
Beliefs and attitudes toward reading English according to five levels (N=76)

Level	<i>n</i>	Item 1		Item 2		Item 3		Item 4		
		Pre-ER	Post-ER	Pre-ER	Post-ER	Pre-ER	Post-ER	Pre-ER	Post-ER	
1	27	<i>M</i>	3.70	4.07	2.78	3.56	2.07	2.44	4.67	4.00
		<i>SD</i>	1.15	0.72	1.03	0.92	0.77	0.96	0.94	0.90
2	23	<i>M</i>	3.91	4.17	3.39	4.26	2.52	2.96	4.17	3.65
		<i>SD</i>	1.02	1.09	0.97	0.85	0.97	0.75	0.82	1.31
3	11	<i>M</i>	4.55	4.27	3.64	4.18	2.64	2.82	4.91	3.91
		<i>SD</i>	0.89	0.75	1.37	1.03	0.88	0.94	0.79	0.90
4	8	<i>M</i>	4.50	4.38	4.25	4.25	2.63	2.88	3.88	4.00
		<i>SD</i>	0.71	0.86	0.97	0.43	0.70	0.60	0.93	1.00
5	5	<i>M</i>	5.40	4.20	5.00	4.00	3.80	3.40	4.00	3.80
		<i>SD</i>	0.80	0.75	0.63	1.36	0.98	0.80	1.41	0.75

Table 3 is the descriptive statistics of changes in participants' beliefs and attitudes towards reading English texts according to their self-reported reading levels. The means of the following items showed improvements: all items of level 1 and level 2, items 2, 3, and 4 of level 3, item 3 of level 4, and item 4 of level 5.

For closer examination of the changes in beliefs and attitudes among different levels, *t*-tests were computed. The result shows that there are significant differences in the following items: item 2 ($t(26) = -4.77, p < 0.01$) and item 4 ($t(26) = 3.61, p < 0.01$) of level 1; item 2 of level 2 ($t(22) = -5.51, p < 0.01$); item 4 of level 4 ($t(10) = 5.24, p < 0.01$); item 1 of level 5 ($t(4) = 6.00, p < 0.01$).

These are many comments that reflect the changes in participants' beliefs and attitudes. For example, for item 2, several students commented that their resistance towards reading in English became lower. Especially, two students commented as follows:

I feel less resistance towards English than before because I felt a sense of achievement every time I read the books [emphasis added]. I also feel I am more confident now.

The biggest thing I gained in this class is that I *feel less resistance towards English through ER [emphasis added]*.

For item 3, the comments from the following two participants especially represent the change that students experienced in terms of reading speed:

I think ER was a way to improve my English skills. ...Now I can guess the meanings of unknown words and *I can read faster [emphasis added]*. ...Also, I feel the distance between English and me got closer.

I feel *my skills in English*, such as vocabulary knowledge and *reading speed, have gotten better [emphasis added]*. ...I enjoyed reading stories which I knew the title but didn't know the content.

For item 4, several students commented they don't translate English into Japanese while they are reading English texts. For example, one student found herself not translating English into Japanese after 4 months of ER:

I realize that *now I can read books without translating English into Japanese [emphasis added]*. ...I spent less time reading, too. ...Reading one book a week was not difficult but enjoyable to me. I hope I continue reading graded readers.

4. Discussion

Improvement of reading rates among different self-reported reading levels

Although we explored the possibilities of effectiveness of ER according to different reading abilities, we did not identify any statistically significant increase in the reading rates between pre- and post ER at any level. However, we must note that we were able to identify a positive increase in the 20 minutes wpm of level 1 and both first one minute wpm and 20 minutes wpm of level 2. Levels 1, 2, 5 are the groups which had an increase in 20 minutes wpm. Although it is difficult to discuss the tendency of level 5 with only three eligible participants, it can be assumed that ER has positive influence on the reading rate gain of at least lower level students.

We have an implication for future research from the results. We may not have had statistically significant results because the amount of exposure to English through ER was not enough to show a significant increase in reading rates. Iwahori (2008) found that students' reading rates increased after they read 28 books in seven weeks. In Robb and Susser (1989), the participants read an average of 641 pages for a year and had an increase in reading rates. Also, Nishizawa, Yoshioka, and Fukada (2010) discussed reading 300,000 words is the threshold for students to feel at ease when reading English texts. Krashen (1993) says it takes at least one school year to develop reading skills through ER. Considering these previous studies, in future research, we need a longer period of time and more exposure to English texts to see whether the result was due to the lack of input or there is no difference in effectiveness among different levels at all.

Improvement of beliefs and attitudes towards reading English texts

There were statistically significant differences between pre- and post-instructions in items 2, 3, and 4 of the questionnaires (Table 3). Their beliefs and attitudes towards reading English texts changed positively. More precisely, when compared to before ER, the participants do not feel the necessity to translate the text into Japanese while reading, feel their reading rate has increased, feel less resistance toward reading English texts. Participants' comments also tell us that they seem to notice the change in their beliefs and attitudes after experiencing ER.

Regardless of these positive changes in their beliefs and attitudes, we have to note one thing in particular — although the participants felt their reading rate had increased, their actual reading rate had not increased significantly. It can be assumed that they thought their reading rate had increased because they began to feel at ease reading English. Their reading rate could possibly increase if they continue the ER activity, as they have a positive feeling towards their reading rate.

We have such overall positive results, however improvement of beliefs and attitudes seem to be different among the five levels. The results of the *t*-test according to self-reported reading

levels shows that the ER has positive influence on lower level learners (level 1 and level 2). Although there were not enough participants in levels 3, 4, and 5 to statistically conclude that lower level students benefit from ER more than upper level students, there may be such tendencies. We should take it into an account that lower level students tend to have more negative attitudes toward reading English to start with so the degree of change can be greater than upper level students who may face the ceiling effect.

Limitations of the Present Study

There are at least four limitations to this study. First, 4 months of ER might have been too short for the effect of ER to appear. The results show there are positive changes in the participants' beliefs and attitudes towards reading English texts. However, the results of reading rates from two tests show no statistically significant difference. Therefore, it is necessary to plan a longer term study (preferably as long as a year) to investigate the change in reading fluency. Second, this study did not measure the accurate understanding of the reading tests. As reading fluency consists of at least "reading speed" and "accuracy" as Wolf and Katzir-Cohen (2001) discusses, future study should use a reliable reading test such as those made by The Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER) to investigate the development of reading fluency more closely. Third, this study only investigated the change in the participants' beliefs and attitudes with Likert scale questionnaire and their written comments. However, in order to find the tendencies among different levels, oral interviews would be necessary. Forth, as we did not have enough participants in higher level groups, we cannot generalize the results. We need more numbers of participants so that the results we found become more general and reliable.

5. Conclusions

Through this exploratory research, we have found that ER could be effective at lrastr for lower level students. Even though 4 months of ER may have been too short to develop students' reading fluency, their beliefs and attitudes toward reading English texts changed for the positive especially with lower level students.

From the results of the study, future studies are necessary to answer the following questions: (a) Is ER more effective for lower level students than upper level of students in terms of the improvement of reading rates and beliefs and attitudes? (b) How much input is necessary for the students to improve their reading rates? Such future research would give us pedagogical insight into the effectiveness of ER and when and how to introduce ER for EFL learners.

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Notes

¹ There are two types of classes they took during the semester as a requirement. Intercultural studies students read long English passages and translate them into Japanese. Then they answered grammatical questions relating to the passages. Child education students answered questions about relatively long passages relating to business and recited the dialogue relating the content of the passages.

²We followed the classification of the levels that is already used in the library of the university.

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 5
Heinemann Guided Readers	Beginner Level (600)		Elementary Level (1100)	Intermediate Level (1600)	Upper Level (2200)	
Oxford Bookworms Library	Starters (250)	Stage 1 (400)	Stage 2 (700)	Stage 3 (1000)	Stage 4 (1400)	Stage 5 (1800)
Oxford Progressive English Readers			Grade 1 (1400)	Grade 2 (2900)	Grade 3 (3100)	Grade 4 (3700)
Penguin Readers	Level 1 (300)		Level 2 (600)	Level 3 (1200)	Level 4 (1700)	Level 5 (2300)
Cambridge English Readers	Starter (250)	Level 1 (400)	Level 2 (800)	Level 3 (1300)	Level 4 (1900)	Level 5 (2800)

Note. Numbers in the parentheses are headwords of the books.

3. The books used in the pre- and posttests are shown in the table below.

Pretest	
Level	Title of the book
1	<i>Sally's Phone</i>
2	<i>Remember Miranda</i>
3	<i>The Children of the New Forest</i>
4	<i>The Wind in the Willows</i>
5	<i>Cranford</i>
Posttest	
1	<i>Driving into Danger</i>
2	<i>Ned Kelly</i>
3	<i>Love among the Haystacks</i>
4	<i>Goldfish</i>
5	<i>The Moonspinners</i>

4. The top ten principles by Day and Bamford (2002) provide a guideline for conceptualizing extensive reading are as follows:

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