

Extensive Reading: Reflections on Fostering Speed and Vocabulary Growth

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This paper describes an exploratory study undertaken by the author in an attempt to improve the extensive reading (ER) component in the environmental studies faculty at a provincial Japanese university (FESSPUK), and goes on to report the author's reflections on ER and attempts to further develop the FESSPUK ER program. Although the chief purpose is the improvement of the specific program, the account may be of interest to teachers using ER, or considering using ER, at other institutions. Though the results are highly tentative, the author makes a number of suggestions for ways of practicing ER that depart from the norm, at least in tertiary education in Japan, in an attempt to align the ER component of a course more effectively with vocabulary learning goals.

日本の大学の英語以外の専攻の学生に対する英語教育において、限られた時間の中でも多読は重要な役割を果たせると考えられる。筆者の勤務している環境共生学部では、語彙学習を重要と考えているが、この面で多読に果たしてどれくらい期待できるのだろうか。Vocabulary Levels Testを用いて、学生の語彙レベル及び一学期を通しての語彙力の変化を測り、改善のためにどのような対策が考えられるかを探る。

Considering the number of presentations related to ER at annual Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) conferences, ER can no longer reasonably be considered a novelty, and this paper will omit the formerly semi-obligatory detailed defence of ER itself and its right to inclusion in an English curriculum. Two points should, however, be mentioned here to explain the author's motivations. Firstly, the author agrees with Krashen (2003) that ER offers the best opportunity for large amounts of "comprehensible input delivered in a low-anxiety situation", and that this input can constitute the raw material needed for all-round progress. Secondly, a primary goal of the FESSPUK English curriculum is the fostering of a reasonable level of reading proficiency and an ER component is considered essential for this, as most first-year students have experienced a predominantly grammar-translation style English reading education, which has given them little chance to foster automaticity in word recognition or reading fluency.

ER was introduced by the author to FESSPUK during the second semester of the 2002-3 academic year, and the author's first complete academic year using ER was 2003-4. During this early period the author was chiefly preoccupied with logistical issues such as ensuring an adequate supply of suitable books and with securing support and agreement from interested colleagues; these and other issues are discussed in Lavin (2004). The theme of the 2004-5 academic year may be described

as exploring the interface between the ER component and other parts of the English curriculum, and looking for ways to ensure better alignment between curricular goals and the practice of ER; it is this that is the subject of this paper.

Many FESSPUK students take a total of six English credit hours, all during their first year of study. The author is their sole or main English teacher for one semester of that year. There is an ER component in the other semester, but the author has no direct control over its weight in assessment or implementation. Thus, it is considered essential that as many options as possible be considered to optimize the ER component and maximize its contribution.

The approach taken in this paper is something of a hybrid. It is somewhat akin to action research (Edge, 2001), in that the primary impetus is the writer's desire to address issues in his own teaching context. It is highly exploratory in nature, dealing only with two classes of students over a short period of time. Nevertheless, as the writer needs to make decisions regarding his teaching in the following academic year, provisional conclusions need to be drawn from the limited data obtained. An attempt is made to describe the author's thoughts regarding the data and how they should influence future plans. In addition, because of the importance (at least in the author's opinion) of ER, methodological and issues are touched upon.

Tailoring ER to Vocabulary Goals

Regarding vocabulary, a FESSPUK goal is that students should learn the Longman Defining Vocabulary (LDV; see, for example, Pearson Education, 2003) during their first year

of study, though we refrain from attempting to define what "learning" should entail. An informal investigation by Jay Melton (2004, personal communication) suggested that a large number of students claimed to know less than half of these words. Knowing a word within its "semantic space" may be realizable only through exposure to the word in many contexts (Carter, 1998, p. 191). Thus, the author has high expectations of ER in serving curricular vocabulary goals. In order to avoid relying too heavily on ER in this regard, and to ensure focus on target words, the author also uses vocabulary textbooks in an attempt to close the gap between present knowledge and goals.

What kind of vocabulary gains can we reasonably expect from an ER program aimed explicitly at vocabulary learning? As a starting point, let us follow Stahl (1999) in assuming a reading rate of 150 words per minute and an hour per day of reading for five days each week. This would lead to a student encountering approximately 2,250,000 words in a year. Assuming a more realistic goal for non-English majors of 15 minutes per day would mean 1,125,000 words encountered per year. Thus far, the author has encountered only one FESSPUK student who can read at this speed, so if we postulate a speed of 100 words (rather optimistic, as described later) per minute we obtain a total of 375,000 words read per year. Continuing to follow Stahl's assumptions, let us assume that 5% of the words encountered are unknown, and that 5% of encounters with unknown words result in learning; by these assumptions we might expect a vocabulary gain of around 940 words over the course of a year. Taking Waring & Takaki's (2003) estimate of 4% recall, we obtain a figure of 750 words over the year.

This is of course a crude calculation involving many undefended assumptions. It is included here because, without clarifying our goals, however provisional, we cannot evaluate our results meaningfully. In the real world, there is inevitably a degree of circularity in the relationship between this figure and any results, as results that persistently differ greatly from this figure are likely to prompt a revision of the goals. This rate of 750 words per year does, however, give us some kind of yardstick by which to measure progress, and the results reported in this paper may be viewed initially from this perspective.

First-semester study: “Balanced” program versus “Extra Reading” program

In the first semester of the 2004-5 academic year, the author decided to attempt to ascertain whether students were actually learning vocabulary from their course of study, and if so how much and at what levels. Since commonly available graded readers are focused on basic vocabulary (though unfortunately publishers are reluctant to disclose the actual lists they use), it was decided that separate measures of the first three 1000-word “bands” should be taken. Further, he decided to take advantage of the fact that he was teaching the same course to two cohorts to get some idea of the relative contribution of ER to any vocabulary learning. Thus, one group, termed the “balanced” group, was taught in what might be called the teacher’s default style, with roughly equal weight given to ER with a guideline of “a book a week”, speaking (using Johann Junge’s TALK system), and explicit vocabulary practice (using Oxford University Press’s series of learners’ crossword books); another group, the

“extra reading” group, had no explicit vocabulary practice, but was instead asked to read “two books a week”, it being explained to them that the large amount of reading required was in place of vocabulary practice.

Following Read (1988), as cited in Read (2000), the instrument chosen was the 1000-word level test and the 2000- and 3000-word bands of the Vocabulary Levels Test, as found in Nation (2001). The emphasis was on finding a “quick-and-dirty” test that was easy to administer and that would not take too much class time. Additionally, since there were no available data on students’ vocabulary knowledge on entering the university, a desirable side effect would be to furnish those data. Further, because the test in its various versions is well-known, this choice maximizes future possibilities of comparing our results with that of other faculties or universities.

A pre-test and a post-test were administered to both the “balanced” and “extra reading” groups. Ideally, these tests would be as far apart as possible, but practical considerations meant that they could only be administered in the second and penultimate complete weeks of the semester, meaning an interval of approximately 12 weeks.

Because the Vocabulary Levels Test is designed as an essentially static measure of vocabulary knowledge, and because of the very short interval between the pre- and post-tests, the treatment cannot be perceived as a genuine test of specific hypotheses. Rather, it is a preliminary step to formulating hypotheses to test more rigorously in future studies.

The group assigned to the “balanced” treatment consisted of 26 students, while the “extra reading” group consisted of 27 students. All students were first-year students of the

environmental sciences faculty; however, their majors were different, the former group consisting of a mixture of Ecology and Human Habitat students, the latter of Food Science students. With one exception, the Food Science students were female, while the “extra reading” group was evenly divided between the sexes. University entrance requirements for the Food Science students are higher than that for the other two majors, and this is reflected in the higher mean scores on all three bands in both pre-and post-tests.

Results and Discussion

The pattern in both groups is similar to that found in the Read study mentioned above. Both groups showed improved scores in the post-test on all three bands. In addition, in both pre- and post-tests, scores declined with frequency, with the single exception of the balanced group, whose 1000-word band score was lower than that in the 2000-word band. The mean scores are shown in Table 1, and the mean percentage gains are shown in Table 2.

These results are only suggestive but we might venture to say that both methods appear to have helped students improve their vocabulary, but that the balanced program appears to have been very slightly more effective. Before comparing the two groups, let us look at what these percentage gains might mean in terms of words learned.

In the 1000-word band, a percentage gain of around 8% theoretically means approximately 80 words learned. However, there is a large number of words, including function words such as *and* and *the*, which are not tested in the Vocabulary Levels Test, and it would be possible to

Table 1. Mean scores (expressed as percentages) for the 2 cohorts in pre-test and post-test at 3 vocabulary bands

		“Balanced” group	“Extra reading” group
1000	Pre	78.99	77.02
	Post	87.38	84.71
2000	Pre	82.56	76.17
	Post	86.53	81.15
3000	Pre	59.23	51.36
	Post	65.87	55.90
TOTAL	Pre	74.09	65.58
	Post	80.61	78.79

Table 2. Mean percentage gains in post-test at 3 vocabulary bands for the 2 cohorts

Test	“Balanced” group	“Extra reading” group
1000-word	8.39	7.70
2000-word	3.97	4.98
3000-word	6.64	4.54

argue that 160 words is a more appropriate figure, if we assume that all students know the first 500 words. One factor that might encourage a downward revision of this figure is that it is possible that many of these words were somewhat known by the students before entering university but not

well enough for them to choose the correct answer under test conditions in the pre-test. The fact that the balanced group's 1000-band score was lower than the same group's 2000-band score is also cause for concern. In view of the fact that several students failed to answer correctly questions such as "This young person is a girl." or "Black is a colour." in the pre-test, it also seems likely that there was some difficulty interpreting the test makers' intentions in the 1000-word band. The imponderables here are so numerous that it may be prudent to disregard these gains.

In the 2000-word band, a roughly 4% gain would translate to the learning of 40 words in the period between pre-and post-tests, while a 5-6% gain in the 3000-word band would translate to the learning of 50-60 words. A combined total of around 100 words over the two bands learnt in roughly a quarter of a year would translate to 400 words learned a year, if learning occurs throughout the year, and 200 words a year if students do not learn during vacations. If we opt to include the 1000-word band results, at a reasonably conservative 50 words, we obtain annual totals of around 600 or 300 words learned.

Improving the program

All these figures are below the target of 750 words mentioned above. Let us examine some of the possible reasons for this and some measures that might be taken to remedy the situation. Anticipating the following discussion, proposed reasons for the gap between the theoretical target and apparent actual progress include: a failure to examine the lexical content of materials; a failure to ascertain students' initial abilities; and unrealistic expectations.

Looking at the vocabulary materials used in the balanced group, although the crossword series itself claims to cover the most basic 2000 words of English (though the list is a secret, we may assume considerable overlap with the LDV), students find Intermediate Crosswords, aimed at the 1000- to 1500- word level, very difficult. Therefore, although doing Intermediate and Advanced (1500-2000 words) Crosswords would be ideal from the point of view of bringing students up to the 2000-word level (assuming that individual students' gaps at the sub-1000 level could be filled through ER or individual efforts), it is necessary to precede Intermediate Crosswords with Elementary Crosswords. The latter title may be assumed to fill the functions of accustoming students to doing crossword puzzles and to the style of the author of the series, recycling elementary vocabulary in a predominantly controlled productive mode, and learning the occasional unknown word. It is probable that it is only with Intermediate Crosswords (that some students fail to finish) that students start filling significant gaps in their recognition vocabulary.

Turning now to the graded readers that students generally read, it is noticeable how few students choose to borrow titles beyond Oxford Bookworms Stage 1 or Cambridge English Readers (CER) Level 1. Many students, in fact, even after a semester or even a year of ER, are reluctant to borrow even these books, preferring, for example, Penguin Readers Level 1 books. What does this mean for their vocabulary development?

Table 3 shows the levels of the CER series and the corresponding stated vocabulary level.

Table 3. Cambridge English Readers: reader levels and stated vocabulary levels

Reader Level	Vocabulary level
Level 1	400
Level 2	800
Level 3	1300
Level 4	1900
Level 5	2800
Level 6	3800

It is clear that it is only at level 3 that we can expect significant help learning new words from the basic 2000-word level, and that we would really need students to be reading copious quantities at levels 4 and 5 to master the whole of the LDV and move beyond it. Let us examine the reasons for this and then consider ways to solve or skirt around the problem.

Length and Reading Speed

Table 4 shows the same data as Table 3, but with the addition of a column giving the average length of books at each level.

Informal observation of students choosing books shows repeatedly that books with thick spines are often rejected without opening. Even when opened, a large number of pages, especially if they are in small type and without illustrations, turns students away. The rare student who does start reading generally fails to finish longer books, either

Table 4. Cambridge English Readers: reader levels, vocabulary levels, and average length

Reader Level	Vocabulary level	Average Length
Level 1	400	4000
Level 2	800	10000
Level 3	1300	15000
Level 4	1900	20000
Level 5	2800	25000
Level 6	3800	30000

because they are too complicated or because the time taken to read them is discouragingly long. Two possible courses of action are apparent here. The first, an attempted solution to the problem, consists in trying various methods to foster the capability and desire, or at least willingness, to read books at a higher level. The second involves providing alternatives to the major publishers' graded readers, either to replace them, or as preparation for them.

Alternatives to standard ER

What may be described as standard ER, at least as practiced in Japan, advocates a system with minimal accountability where moderate amounts of self-selected reading are done in class and at home. The assumption appears to be that students know what they need to read next in order to progress or that there is adequate time for teacher consultations that will enable students to reach this awareness. In large classes and short courses, however, it is questionable whether this is true. Successes described in,

for example, Hill (2001) seem to presuppose a curriculum where adequate time is allotted to English. Furthermore, Hill advocates that self-selected reading should not be the only reading method used, and that class texts and a reading course allowing limited self-selection and focused on progression to more difficult texts are also necessary. This would appear to constitute recognition that self-directed ER has limits. It leaves open the question regarding the best options for courses where this is inadequate time for all three of these reading methods.

This author regards it as a high priority that as many options as possible be aired publicly regarding possible ways to optimize ER. There follow a number of ideas that may help in moving students to a higher level of reading within a broadly ER paradigm. Some are yet to be tested at all and others have been tested only cursorily. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to advocate them strongly. Nevertheless, it is felt that they are worthy of consideration as possibilities for modifying ER programs in line with curricular goals. Though there is as yet little evidence that they are effective, equally there is no proof that the de facto standard practice of reading a freely-chosen book each week is the best practice, nor that it can meet expectations. Rather, it is suggested that the prevailing model is a kind of historical accident arising from a curriculum centered on intensive reading and little choice on the part of students with regard to what they read, and it is therefore natural that practitioners have attempted to balance this with ER with ample choice. Because many teachers feel that the balance has not yet been righted, and other teachers find little or no time for ER in the curriculum, the debate still tends to center on whether or not

ER is a suitable thing to include in English courses, and why, and, once the decision to adopt it is made, there tends to be a preoccupation with logistical issues such as where to keep the books, how many titles are necessary and how many copies of each title, what kind of record-keeping system to use, and so on. Debate on principled modification of the methodology tends to be comparatively scarce.

The description above of students' observed reluctance to choose longer books suggests that an affective barrier is involved here. Thus, we might suppose that assigning a longer reading, and providing appropriate support, might deal with the problem. The author has assigned a CER Level 4 book, *Staying Together* (Wilson, 2001), in this way. Support provided included simultaneous audio input (students listened to an audio tape of the book while following in their own copy of the book), assigning a chapter to be read for homework and then to be summarized in small groups, and encouraging students to make a note of difficult words in the book.

Most teachers agree that a necessity for progress through ER is adequate quantity. Reading a lot in a reasonable timeframe implies adequate speed, something which many students obviously lack. This author and other ER practitioners would like to think that most students will gain this naturally through the reading habit. But there is no research that documents whether and how fast an increase in speed occurs. In short courses in particular, no speed increase may occur naturally. Even if it does happen, we should consider the potential advantages of a speed increase at the beginning of an ER program rather than at the end, in terms of confidence gained and potential increases in total quantity read.

Revisiting the provisional reading quantity and vocabulary learning targets mentioned earlier, if we assume a reading speed of 80 words per minute (a figure that appears from informal testing to be approximately true of many FESSPUK students), the annual vocabulary gains to be expected range from 480 to a mere 160. By the same token, a gain in reading speed to 120 words per minute allows a revision to a range of figures from 720 to 240, the former figure being very close to the 750-word target mentioned above.

It is worth bearing in mind here the ER bookstrapping hypothesis (Day & Bamford, 1998), whereby learners who have an enjoyable reading experience are said to be motivated to read more and thus enter a virtuous circle of more reading, feeding in to better progress in learning. If learners can approach ER from the perspective of a reasonably rapid reader who can finish a book of moderate complexity and length in a reasonable period of time, this virtuous circle is likely to come into a play more quickly and more obviously to the learner, and speed is likely to foster greater quantities, which in turn enable further gains in speed. Therefore, if we can find a way to foster increased reading speeds beyond those naturally occurring through more reading, the benefits may be disproportionately large.

One method that the author has tried with one cohort involves accelerated audio input. The publisher's tapes are digitized and software is used to accelerate the sound files while normalizing pitch, and then the resultant audio files are used in place of the original tapes in class.

Staying Together is, according to SSS Eigo Gakushuuhou Kenkyukai (2003), 18000 words in length. The combined length of the corresponding four sides of cassette tape,

according to the publisher, are approximately 176 minutes. This implies a speed of around 100 words per minute. This may be a challenge for some students but may be holding back others, encouraging them to limit their silent reading speed to their reading aloud speed.

The author has found that accelerating book excerpts by 5-10% is generally unnoticed by students, while 15-20% increases are tolerated, but only on 2nd or 3rd listenings. 25-30% increases tend to sound slightly ridiculous and prompt complaints. Proper studies would be needed to determine to what extent this method can be of use, but it seems at least plausible that students would learn what reading faster "feels like", thus creating the potential for subsequent real gains in fluency. This method may be useful alongside or as part of the assisted repeated reading method of Taguchi et al. (2004).

In similar vein, CALL software recently installed in the university's computer laboratories has a function whereby a text is not displayed immediately in its entirety but it is divided into chunks which are displayed one-by-one at a speed chosen by the user. Informal advice from the developers calls for learners having difficulties keeping up with the text to, somewhat counter-intuitively, initially increase the speed. It is claimed that when the learner goes back down to the initial speed she will have a subjective impression that the speed is slower than before, and that this can enable gains in independent reading speed.

Alternative reading materials

The above ideas aimed at "pushing" students to a higher level of reading may not be to the taste of many teachers

who feel that ER offers a rare chance for students to take control of their own learning and would therefore not welcome measures such as these that would tend to make ER less “natural”. An alternative would be to offer reading material that provides exposure to a wider range of words.

This choice is potentially a dangerous one, in that vocabulary knowledge clearly affects reading. Hu & Nation (2000) suggest that 98% knowledge of words in a text is desirable for reasonably fluent reading. If this is the case, offering reading material with a wider range of vocabulary may be counterproductive.

On the other hand, it is unlikely that vocabulary load is the only factor in reading comprehension. Evidence for this view comes from, for example, Young (1999), who found that mainly lexical modifications made to a text with a view to simplifying it for non-native readers resulted in no improvement in recall tests. This suggests that ease of reading is a function of a dynamic interplay of factors. Qualifying the Hu & Nation position somewhat, we might say that, if syntax or discourse structure and other dimensions of difficulty are beyond a certain level, adequate comprehension depends on knowledge of around 98% of the words of a text.

Turning this round, if syntax, book length, sentence length, and other non-vocabulary factors are controlled to avoid undue difficulty for learners, it seems plausible that they could handle a heavier vocabulary load. This assumption appears to be borne out by the author’s recent experiences with books from Usborne Young Reading: Series 2 (Watson, 2003, amongst others). These books, and others aimed at native speaker children rather than mature learners of

English as a foreign language, abound with sentences such as “A fox was out for a stroll when he saw a crow perched up in a tree”, in which few students have previously learned *stroll* or *perch*. These books are generally the first to disappear from the class collection in class, and perusal of class borrowing records suggests that readers subsequently choose more books from the same series. As a teacher, one would hope that large quantities of reading of this sort would result in increases in vocabulary knowledge and reading fluency, which would enable students to tackle more difficult texts.

Realistic goals; multiple methods

Informal polling of students indicates that some in the “extra reading” group found the ER requirements onerous. Acceptance of the requirements to some extent presupposed student perception of release from explicit vocabulary materials requirements. Yet this perception was more a reality for the teacher who was using these materials with another cohort and had used them in previous years than for first-year students who had never experienced these materials. Furthermore, students are generally observed to enjoy crosswords; thus, as students became aware of the requirements in place with the other cohort, they are as likely to have felt cheated by this difference as liberated. Irrespective of the idiosyncrasies of this specific situation, it seems that there may be a quite low natural limit to the amount of reading that students new to ER are able to do. Thus, although the comparative figures for the two groups do not necessarily demonstrate that “extra reading” style treatments are misguided, they do at least suggest some caution at the outset of an ER program.

The above discussion shows that, following the more optimistic assumptions, the cohorts figuring in this study described may be experiencing the kinds of vocabulary gains that we might expect. Under the more pessimistic assumptions, it is clear that we would be falling far short. In particular, since students change teachers after the first semester and assessment is done wholly on a semester basis, it is clear that, without adequate internal motivation, students are unlikely to read during vacations. In practice, if we add on test periods and the like, this means that students will be reading for only around half of the year. Thus, the biggest potential reading and vocabulary gains may come from building a perception that reading is enjoyable and making it easier for students to do ER during vacations.

Program Development

The above discussion illuminates some of the factors that may come into play in the success or otherwise of an ER program from the point of view of vocabulary, and outlines some of the available options. Numerous possibilities for future development suggest themselves. A few of the more promising or pressing directions are outlined in this section.

Firstly, a decision will have to be reached concerning testing instruments. The Vocabulary Levels Test appears to be a reasonable choice for a number of reasons, but it does not test depth of vocabulary knowledge, and is not designed to test achievement. It may prove necessary to supplement or replace it. If time allows, it would be desirable additionally to test the 5000-word level.

Secondly, reading speed gains are left to chance in the present scheme. Where slowness is due to unfamiliarity with vocabulary or syntax, the status quo may be optimal, speed gradually increasing with increased familiarity. However, it seems likely that in some cases slowness is at least partially a question of habit: if students are accustomed to reading only difficult texts, and if “reading” implies reading aloud, more rapid silent reading may not come naturally. Informal polling of students suggests that most pronounce silently all the words they are reading, some of them actually mouthing the sounds. In coming academic years, a number of measures are planned to investigate this issue and encourage faster reading speeds, including: encouraging or enforcing the reading of large quantities of the simplest graded readers, with the explicit goal of increasing speed; increased use of conventional extensive listening, which may encourage slower students to increase their reading speed to around 100 words per minute, and later in a course extensive listening with accelerated input, to encourage more able students to move beyond 100 words per minute. The hypothetical calculations outlined earlier illustrate the sensitivity of total reading quantity to early speed gains, suggesting that it may be worth investing considerable effort to this end.

Thirdly, if vocabulary learning is a major goal, it is worthwhile to explicitly tailor the program to this end. Extensive use of the Usborne Young Reading and other series aimed at native English speaking children appears to be a promising way of divorcing richer vocabulary content from other dimensions of difficulty, such as syntax, book length, type size, the presence or otherwise of pictures, and so on. New purchases, for the university library, for

class sets, and for the prospective ER club (see below) are planned.

Finally, considering the fact that classes are held for little over half of the calendar year, any measures that encourage students to want to read more are likely to be invaluable, especially if they lead to regular reading throughout the calendar year. Towards this goal, the author and an interested colleague in the same university's faculty of letters have gathered a number of motivated students with a view to launching an official ER club. It is hoped that this will eventually lead to a core of students firmly committed to ER. Efforts are also underway through university committees to persuade the university library to relax its vacation lending policies in the case of graded readers. In addition, it seems apparent that providing students with plentiful information regarding alternative ways to obtain books is desirable.

Conclusions

The starting point of this paper was a concern with meeting curricular vocabulary learning goals, which led to an exploratory study in which two cohorts were given treatments that differed in respect of the amount of ER they were expected to do and the presence or absence of explicit vocabulary learning exercises. The reflections that the results of this study occasioned are described, and it is suggested that a variety of measures are worthy of consideration, particularly in situations where inadequate time is devoted to English to ensure appreciable natural gains from reading. In particular, it is suggested that exposure to reading materials more vocabulary-rich, but shorter, than EFL graded readers, as well as various measures aimed at increasing reading

speed and/or pushing more difficult reading input, may have a role to play alongside more common measures centered on building intrinsic motivation.

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