

The measurement problem in Extensive Reading: Students' attitudes

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For most Japanese university students, Extensive Reading (ER) represents an entirely new way of acquiring a language. This paper will present and discuss data from an online quiz and two online surveys used to assess how well students in an ER program in a Japanese university had grasped the methodological value of ER. For many practitioners in Japan, one of the main objectives of ER is to change the attitudes of students towards language learning and towards English. Our data show that giving students explicit instruction in ER methodology can lead to a change in study habits and attitudes towards studying the language.

この論文は、ある日本の大学で多読（ER）プログラムに参加した学生が多読プログラムの方法論的な価値をどれくらい理解していたかを評価するために行った小テスト（1回）とオンライン調査（2回）の結果を提示し、考察している。ほとんどの参加学生にとって多読は全く新しい言語習得の方法であった。日本でERを実践している多くの教師にとって、ERの主目的の一つは語学学習と英語に対する学生の態度を変化させることである。我々のデータは、学生にERの方法論を明確に説明することが、彼らの学習習慣、及び言語学習に対する態度を変化させることにつながる、という事を示している。

THE LAST few years have seen a steadily increasing emphasis on transparency and accountability in the assessment of students. This trend shows no signs of abating in the near future. Teachers are likely to be required to be ever more scrupulous and systematic in their grading procedures; and there will probably be mounting pressure to adopt external frameworks of reference and implement statistically valid assessments of curricula and teaching programs.

The Japanese education system is strong on certain kinds of English language proficiency assessment, for example multiple-choice questions of reading comprehension, and to a greater



extent grammar and vocabulary. In recent years, the national Center Test, which serves as the first stage in the university admissions process, has included a listening component. There is also a nascent trend in some universities to adopt the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in the assessment of speaking skills.

The authors of this paper are concerned with the issue of assessment in another relatively new area, that of Extensive Reading (ER), by which we mean reading large quantities of texts which are very easily understood (Helgesen, 2005). However, we are not concerned here with the testing of proficiency so much as with the question of changes in attitude. This is not because we have decided to discount the value of assessing gains in the specific skills associated with ER; for a number of years now we have used the tests devised by David Hill and his colleagues in the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER); and the results from these tests have given us useful feedback on students' progress.

There is a wide range of assessments which might be considered appropriate to ER, but in all cases, backwash should remain an important consideration; hence we feel it is important not to do anything that may put students off reading (Brierley, 2010). This means that testing comprehension or vocabulary might not be the best way to assess student participation. Testing, after all, is likely to result in feelings of anxiety, which it has been argued can have a negative effect on the acquisition process (Krashen, 1992).

There are a number of arguments against assessment in ER. On one hand, narrowing the perceived outcomes of extensive reading to a set of skills that can be tested seems to miss the point that the true aim of the method is properly conceived in terms of acquisition in its broadest sense (Krashen, 2004a). It is also possible that certain kinds of assessment in ER, such as comprehension questions or the requirement to write summa-

ries, make no difference to the eventual gains in acquisition, and may even be detrimental as they demotivate students and eat into time that could be used for reading (Prowse, 2002; Mason & Krashen, 2004). Most simply, it has been argued that in ER, reading should be "its own reward", and so there should be "few or no follow-up exercises" (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 8). Several ER practitioners have noted the conflict between the learner autonomy that ER encourages and the institutional requirement to assess students through testing (Brown, 2010). The least compromising approach to this question must surely be that of Sakai, whose three main ER precepts include the prescription "No tests" (Sakai & Kanda, 2005, p. 8).

Nonetheless, it is also true that reading fluency can be reliably measured, and in a successful ER program using tests of fluency and reading speed to present students with a numerical demonstration of their progress would be an excellent means of further enhancing students' motivation (Schmidt, 2007). We say "further" here because we have also come to believe that one of the major benefits of ER is that it is intrinsically motivating. Even without quantifiable gains in reading skills, ER offers students the chance to become more autonomous and, on an emotional level, more immersed and involved in their study of the language than has previously been possible. Clearly, this has a lot to do with the kind of immediate gratification to be had from enjoying "real language use right away" (Krashen, 2004b, p. 3). But to be able to arrive at this kind of experience, Japanese students especially need to change their study habits and attitudes.

In considering standard frameworks of assessment, devised to fulfil institutional requirements, Alderson (2000) notes:

Reading is, for many people, an enjoyable, intense, private activity, from which much pleasure can be derived, and in which one can become totally absorbed... is difficult if not impossible to replicate within an assessment

setting. [Testing] destroys the very nature of the event. (p. 28)

Our sense of this discrepancy between traditional forms of assessment and the nature of reading for pleasure led us to wonder how we might broaden the scope of our assessment procedures. What exactly should we be assessing? The students? The books they are reading? Or should we focus instead on the system we are using, or on the teachers? Could we, as Alderson (2000) encourages us to do, incorporate the less measurable aspects of the ER experience into our assessment construct?

Certain aspects of reading—like appreciation, enjoyment and individual response—may not be measurable and need to be assessed, or reported, in different ways. This does not mean that they do not belong in our constructs, but that we need to be aware that the tests we produce will inevitably under-represent those constructs. (p. 123)

We already had some experience of surveying teachers' responses to the ER program in our university. The following comments are from questionnaires given to teachers (Brierley, 2007, p. 137):

- “[ER] contributed very much to improve students’ motivation to read English books”
- “. . . great chance for students to . . . dip their toes into the swimming pool of English and to build confidence in their ability to comprehend and even enjoy or be inspired by it.”

An online quiz: Method and rationale of ER

All teachers in the ER program were encouraged to explain the basic thinking behind ER to their students at the beginning of the course. Instruction in ER rationale included introducing

the concepts of language acquisition and reading in context. Students were also directed to stop reading if they found books to be difficult or uninteresting, and to read without dictionaries, as recommended by Day and Bamford (1998), Prowse (2002), and Sakai (2002) among other ER advocates. Students were also advised to initially ignore unfamiliar words, focusing instead on following the story. This is advocated by Sakai (2002) and by Wallace (1992), who states that the “successful reader . . . skipped inessential words” (p. 58). We wrote several pages introducing this theory and practice of ER in the textbook used by all classes in the ER program (Adams et al., 2009; see Appendix).

An online quiz, in English, was conducted in three classes taught by the same teacher to assess students’ knowledge of the method and rationale of ER, and their knowledge of books, levels and publishers. Four of the nine multiple-choice questions that constituted the quiz are shown below. The quiz was designed to test whether students had understood and remembered the methodological principles presented in the orientation sessions at the beginning of the course. Students may have answered such questions correctly without actually reading in the prescribed fashion, but at least we were able to ascertain whether or not they knew how they ought to read.

1. How did you learn your native language?
 - A. By studying grammar rules
 - B. By writing out words many times
 - C. By acquisition
 - D. By genetic inheritance

2. How do you learn new words by doing extensive reading?
 - A. By looking up difficult words in the dictionary
 - B. By translating words into Japanese
 - C. By translating Japanese words into English

- D. By seeing words in context many times
3. What should you do if you don't like a book because it is too difficult, or not interesting?
- Use a dictionary
 - Read from the beginning again
 - Stop reading and get a different book
 - Write the difficult words from the book out many times
4. What should you do first if you don't understand a word?
- Look in the dictionary
 - Guess the meaning
 - Ignore the word and keep reading
 - Ask someone
 - Stop reading

Figures 1 to 3 show the answers given to questions 1 to 3. (T1 and E1 are in the first semester of the ER program; M2 are in the first semester of the second year of the program. The total number of students was 73.)

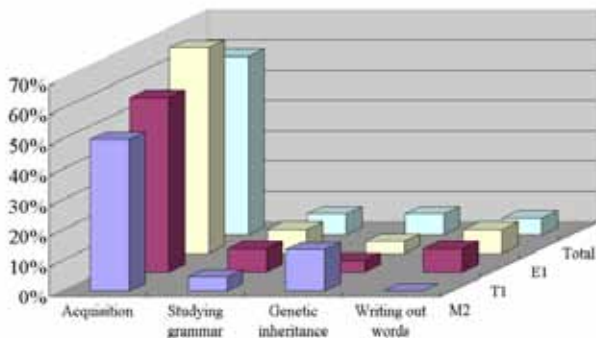


Figure 1. How did you learn your native language?

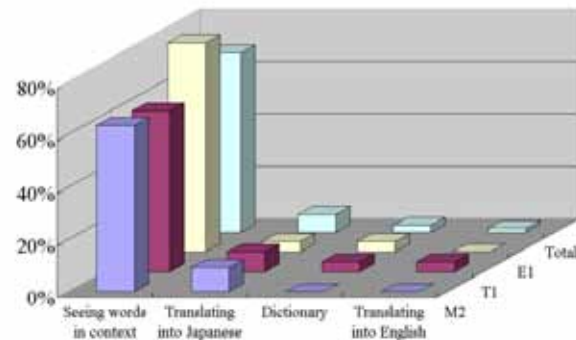


Figure 2. How do you learn new words by doing extensive reading?

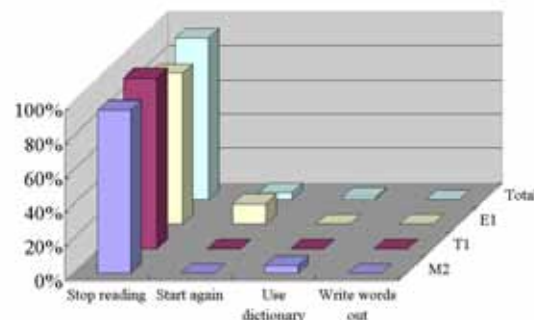


Figure 3. What should you do if you don't like a book?

Because the objective of these online activities was communicating the rationale behind ER, students were allowed multiple attempts at these questions. After being shown a score, though

not the “correct” answers, they were allowed to retake the quiz. Our results showed that almost all students had grasped that they should either ignore unfamiliar vocabulary or else try to guess what it meant. This was a good result, but the students hesitated between the two most popular answers, many switching from “guess” to “ignore”. Figure 4 shows the first answers students gave. Figure 5 shows their final answers, after many had retaken the quiz.

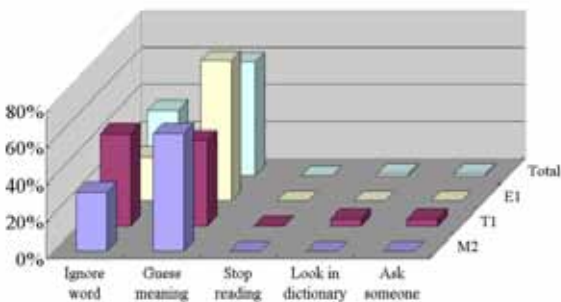


Figure 4. What should you do first if you don't understand a word? Students' initial responses.

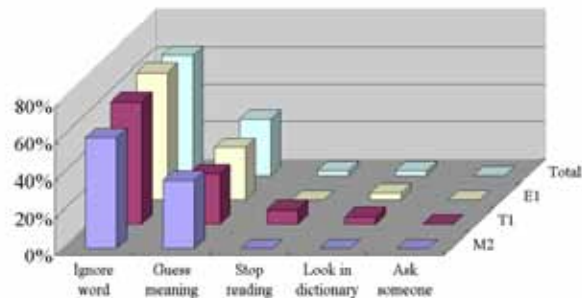


Figure 5. What should you do first if you don't understand a word? Students' responses after retaking the test.

An online survey: Students' ER practice

An online survey, of eight questions, was given in English to the same three groups of students. Some of the questions were designed simply to gather data about what students had been reading. The questions asked students how many pages they read per week, how much time they read outside class, what kind of books they preferred, what levels they read at, and what their favourite publishers were. The survey included the following two questions:

5. How often do you use a dictionary?
 - A. Never
 - B. Once every chapter
 - C. Once every page
 - D. Once every paragraph
 - E. Once every sentence

F. Every word

6. How often do you translate in your head?

A. Never

B. Once every chapter

C. Once every page

D. Once every paragraph

E. Once every sentence

F. Every word

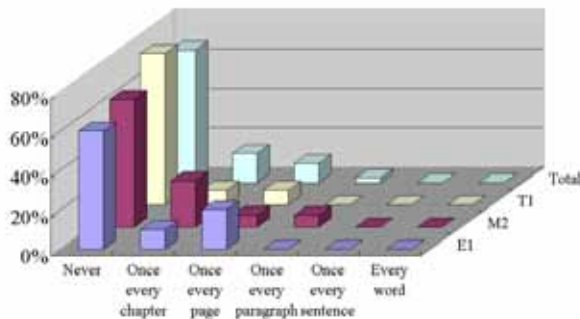


Figure 6. How often do you use a dictionary?

As can be seen in Figure 6, most of the students in these three classes never used a dictionary. This was a gratifying result as it demonstrated that the teacher had been successful in getting students to adopt one of the key reading strategies—no dictionaries. Despite this triumph, the results from the sixth question, shown below in Figure 7, revealed that a large proportion of the students were still translating in their heads as they read.

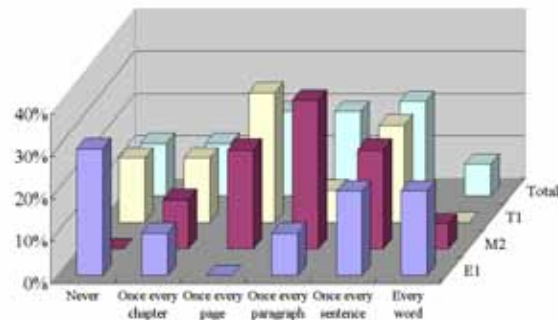


Figure 7. How often do you translate in your head?

An online survey: Students' attitudes towards ER

In order to investigate students' attitudes towards our ER program, we conducted an online survey. The survey, which was in Japanese, was voluntary and made available to approximately 1,000 students in 35 classes. The 150 students who responded constituted a sample that, while small, was still large enough to give a clear indication of the kinds of opinions held, particularly by the more motivated students. More details of the 24-question survey can be found in Wakasugi, Sato, Niimura, Brierley and Kunimune (2009).

The responses to the question: あなたにとって、多読で英語の本を読む主な理由はなんだと思いますか？(What do you think are the main reasons for doing ER?) were categorised as follows. The percentages in brackets show how many of the responses were identical or meant the same thing.

Attitudes towards English

- 英語に慣れる (To get used to English.) (30%)

- 英語への抵抗感をなくす (To get rid of my negative feelings towards English.)

Skills

- 英語力アップ (To improve my English ability.) (22%)
- 読むスピードを上げる (To read faster.) (10%)
- ボキャブラリーを増やすこと (To expand my vocabulary.) (10%)
- 文法を学ぶこと (To learn grammar.) (1%)

While few students commented that ER could help them to learn grammar, this does not necessarily mean that students do not think ER can help them learn grammar. It may simply be that that learning grammar is a low priority in students' minds.

Learning style

Learning efficiency seemed to be the issue at stake in 5% of responses. Below are two examples of such responses:

- とにかく英語に多く触れることで、英語の能力があがる一番の方法だと思うから。(I think the best way to improve our English is to encounter as much English as possible.)
- 流れから意味をよみとる練習。(To practice getting the meaning from the context.)

Other comments on learning style included:

- 大学に入り、高校と比べ英語を勉強する機会が減ってしまった。だから、こういう形で定期的に英語を読めるのは最低限度の英語の勉強だと思う。(In university we have fewer opportunities to study English than in high school, so the least we can do is to learn English by reading books regularly.)

- 自分の興味のある本を読むことができるので英語を楽しくかつ効率よく勉強できると思います。(Because we read books that we are interested in, studying English is more fun and more efficient.)
- 自分で読みたい本を読むことによって進んで読み進められること(無理やり読むことではない)。(We can read more because we choose books by ourselves and read voluntarily, rather than being forced to do so.)

Some comments in this category could also be seen as referring to teaching style, for example:

- 高校の授業のように一文一文を訳すのではなく、自然に英語が頭の中で理解できるようにするため。(To understand English naturally, rather than translating into Japanese sentence-by-sentence as happens in high school classes.)

The content of the books

- 本の内容がおもしろいから。(The books are interesting.)
- 自分の育ってきた文化とは違う文化に触れるため。(To come into contact with cultures different to my own.)
- ...教科書にない会話などが読める。(...we can read dialogues which are not in textbooks.)

These latter comments are interesting because they show that ER is intrinsically motivating when students can find books that they enjoy reading. Indeed, the final response suggests that students are even able to discern differences in discourse style and to appreciate that reading fiction exposes them to patterns of speech that they would not otherwise encounter.

In contrast, the comments which follow reveal that there are also students who miss the point to such an extent that either the principal reason they adduce for doing ER has to do solely

with the extrinsic motivations of fulfilling the institutional requirement, or else they fail altogether to grasp why they are doing ER.

Extrinsic motivation

- 単位を取得するため。(To get a credit.) (2%)
- 仕事に生かすこと。(To get a job.) (1%)

Negative responses

- わかりません。(I don't know.) (2%)
- 暇つぶし。(To kill time.) (2%)

At first, we wondered whether the last response suggested that students were enjoying reading so much that they were doing it in their free time. However, we feel confident in classifying this comment as indicating indifference or antipathy towards ER. Although such responses were few, it is likely that this survey underestimates the number of students who harbour negative feelings towards ER. This is because it was probably the more intrinsically motivated students who responded to the survey. In the near future we hope to conduct a fuller survey, which is likely to reveal a higher proportion of students whose motivation is either extrinsic or else altogether absent.

Summary of survey results

The proportion of comments in each category can be seen below. Several comments fall into more than one category, so the total is more than 100%:

- Change in Attitude (50%)

- Skills (50%)
- Teaching or Learning style (19%)
- Content of books (6%)
- Extrinsic Motivation (6%)
- Negative (4%)

The results show that, while many students view ER as a way to improve their English, many also see it in terms of attitude or methodology. To a large extent, the question of how well students have understood the methodological principles of ER will be closely connected to shifts in attitude. The authors previously found a correlation between the numbers of books read by students and the perceived value of ER (Brierley & Ruzicka, 2006); and one might expect there to be a similar correlation between the two main themes of attitudinal shift and methodological understanding in the responses to the present survey. We have yet to test this, but the following two comments suggest that those students who understand how ER represents an entirely different pedagogy to that which they were presented with in high school are also those who will benefit most from the program.

- 今までの受験勉強での英語とのかかわり方、特に英語＝英単語と文法といったような意識を変えるためかなと思った。物語の中の生きている英語に触れることで、単語は文脈の中で意味を持ち、文法はそれらを繋いでゆくものであるという、言語としての英語を再発見できると思う。(We can change our relationship to English, which until now has only been studied to pass examinations. Specifically we learned that English = vocabulary + grammar. When we encounter practical English in a story, we can rediscover English as a language in which words have meanings in contexts and grammar is there to connect them.)

- 英語を本当に使えるようにするため。受験のために詰め込まれた英語ではなく、使える英語を学ぶためには、英語をたくさん聞き、英語で書かれたものをたくさん読むことが大切だと感じる。(We want to use practical English. To learn practical English, rather than English for examinations, it is important to listen to and read a lot of English.)

Conclusion

As well as measuring students' reading proficiency, assessment of ER, we argue, should also focus on whether the teacher has been successful in changing the students' approach to studying language and the way in which they think about English. In the Japanese EFL context, language is often fragmented into testable components. ER, on the other hand, seeks to put language back together again and make it whole. One of our aims as teachers is surely to change how students think about English and language learning. The shift which often occurs in students' attitudes as a result of doing ER is one of the chief benefits of the approach.

One of the fundamental problems we are grappling with may simply be that before the learner has genuinely read "extensively", which means to read hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of words, there really isn't very much to measure, at least in terms of the kinds of skills that, traditionally, proficiency tests are designed to measure. And hence attitude is all we are left with. On the other hand, though, we might also argue that attitudes matter more than anything else.

Bio data

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Appendix

Pages introducing Extensive Reading, from Alps Adventure (Adams et al., 2009).