Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

The pleasures and pains of extensive reading

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The present study attempts to identify reasons for difficulty students find in extensive reading (ER). What do students find difficult in reading graded readers and English-speaking children's leveled readers, which are supposed to be easy and fun to read? With this question in mind, data on Japanese EFL university students' views and comments were collected through reading logs, weekly written comments in class, conferences, observation notes, and interviews. The qualitative analysis revealed five main reasons for difficulty in ER. Also, it was found that, instead of articulating about the difficulties, the students frequently explained what they liked or enjoyed in their ER experience. Interestingly, the five main reasons for difficulties can also be the reasons considered for the pleasures of ER. The pedagogical implication is that, by focusing on the pleasures of ER, the students will be able to overcome the challenges and difficulties.

　本研究は、学生が多読を難しく感じる理由を特定することを目的とする。グレイディッドリーダーズや英語話者の児童向け段階別読み物など、易しく読めるはずの図書について、学生は何を困難と思うのだろうか？　英語を学ぶ日本の大学生の視点や意見のデータとして、多読授業の読書記録、週ごとの授業感想、面談、観察記録、およびインタビューが集められた。質的分析により多読の困難さの理由には主に5つあることが分かった。また、学生は困難さよりも、多読で好きなこと、楽しさの理由について説明することが多かった。多読の困難の理由は、多読を楽しむ理由にもなりうる。教育上の示唆として、多読の楽しさに焦点を向けることにより、多読で感じる困難さを学生が克服することができると思われる。

Extensive reading as pleasure reading

Extensive reading (ER) is, put simply, reading a large amount of books. ER is seen as an effective educational method to improve English reading skills in general as well as to gain positive attitudes towards foreign language learning. The success of ER implemented in the EFL classroom is evident in the improvement in the students' reading ability and is dependent on how much students read. To read a lot, students need to spend a lot of time reading. And students who find enjoyment in reading will be willing to spend more time reading. The characteristics of successful ER programs pointed out by Day &
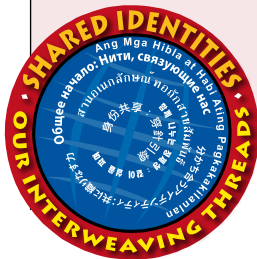
Bamford (1998) include "reading for pleasure, information, and general understanding," and also "Reading is its own reward. (p. 8)" Krashen (2004), using his terminology of "free voluntary reading," likewise stresses the pleasure of reading (p. 28). ER as pleasure reading is the key to success, and in order to introduce ER in the EFL curriculum, it is important to start with easier reading materials within the linguistic competence of the students (Day & Bamford 1998), and even with picture books or very short graded readers (Sakai & Kanda 2005, Takase 2008). To illustrate, I implemented ER in my university classes, gradually increasing the number and series of easy and short books available to students in the past five years. However, there were both successes and failures from my point of view. In this study I attempt to focus on what makes ER a difficult challenge for the students, in spite of the instructor's intention of making ER easier and fun for them.

The motivation for this study stems from a case study I conducted on a university student's three-year experience in ER (Kanda 2007). Kenji (pseudonym) started ER by reading very short and easy English materials, mostly picture books for English-speaking children and the lowest levels of graded readers. His reading skills were quite low, as seen from the average number of words per book recorded during the first semester: 306 words. But yet Kenji continued to read, encouraged by the fact that he gradually became able to read books that were previously too difficult for him. Kenji read 481 titles with 1,038,676 words in total in three years, and the average word count per book increased to 6,398 words. He was now reading graded readers of 1,500-2,000 headwords (approximately 10,000 total words) without a

dictionary, in one sitting, sometimes two, three, or even four titles in one day. However, Kenji's three-year ER was not without difficulties and problems. He could have given up on ER totally in the second year and actually did for a few months, when he was not enrolled in an ER class and had to continue on his own borrowing books from the university library. In addition to having trouble finding time for ER and keeping momentum, Kenji's accounts of his problems in ER surrounded the selection of books available for him to read.

From these findings from my previous case study, the questions remained. While ER is supposed to be fun and easy, teachers and students alike know that the reality is not that simple. Students enjoy and struggle with reading at the same time. And when students find ER difficult, they will stop reading English after the ER class is finished and will fail to see the improvement as Kenji saw.

What do Japanese students find difficult, stressful, or tiring in ER class which, in the aim of making ER real pleasure reading, is provided with easier graded readers and English-speaking children's leveled readers? The results will have pedagogical implications as to how teachers can deal with this issue and support students' reading.

The study
Research question

The research question in this study was:

> What do Japanese students find difficult in extensive reading?

Second language (L2) learning difficulty, as distinct from learning disabilities such as dyslexia, has been examined in relation to motivation, learning styles, and aptitude (Ehrman 1996; Dörnyei 2006). The present study addresses the issue specifically in the context of the ER classroom.

Participants

The participants were 46 male and 18 female university students majoring in law. The 64 students were enrolled in two compulsory English ER classes taught by the researcher. They were between the ages of 18 and 21, and had no previous experience of ER, or reading English books on their own.

Data collection

The data were collected by the instructor who analyzed students' reading logs and written comments on weekly in-class sessions. The instructor's observation notes and conferences with the students were also used as data, as well as follow-up interviews with some of the students. As the instructor, I made an attempt to identify difficulties students seemed to encounter during the ER classes. The original objective of the data collection was for pedagogical purposes, trying to monitor how much students were reading and to help students who were having trouble with ER.

During each ER class, students kept their own reading logs with all the dates, titles, and word counts of the books they had read (see Appendix 1). The students also wrote very short reactions to the books in their reading logs, either in Japanese or English. In addition, the students reported written comments as to how they were reading at the end of each class (see Appendix 2). The one-on-one conferences between student and instructor were done in class for approximately five minutes every one or two class sessions. Follow-up interviews were conducted on some of the students who approached the instructor for guidance.

The data collection started from the start of the classes in April through October 2008, and the classes met 18 times for 90 minutes during that period. As I gathered data, however, it became evident that students did not comment on their reading difficulties even though they were asked to do so. To elicit more detailed data, one open-ended questionnaire concerning the difficulty in reading was administered in late September or early October (see Appendix 3).

The extensive reading class

The ER class met once a week for 90 minutes. ER was exercised mostly in the classroom setting and not as homework to ensure that students had time to actually read. It was also a chance for the instructor to provide immediate support and guidance (Takase 2008). About 60 to 80 minutes of class time was devoted to silent sustained reading (Pilgreen 2000), setting aside a block of time for students to read silently and individually. There were three rules for students' ER in class (Sakai & Kanda 2005), namely, first, do not use a dictionary; second, skip unknown or difficult words and continue to read; and third, switch to a different book if you find the book hard to understand or difficult. The students were told not to consult a dictionary in class while reading. They were encouraged to read books that they could read without the help of a dictionary.

In the first class sessions, the class was provided with very short books with a lot of illustrations, so that students could easily grasp the meaning with the help of pictures and read fluently. The in-class reading materials included picture books for native English-speaking children learning to read (e.g., Oxford Reading Trees, I Can Read Books, Scholastic Readers), as well as graded readers for English learners (e.g., Foundations Reading Library, Macmillan Readers, Penguin Readers, Cambridge English Readers, Oxford Bookworm Library) (see Appendix 4). The students were encouraged to read many easy and short materials first and gradually start to read longer books.

In addition to providing most of the class time for ER, the students were told to read once during the week, at the university library. The assignment was for students to read five titles of their choice outside class. The university library, like the book carts brought into the classroom, carries a great deal of very short materials, so some students chose to read only picture books with a few words, and some chose relatively longer materials.

As mentioned earlier, the students kept their own reading logs, or "tadoku notebook" (SSS Group 2008) and wrote down all the dates, titles, number of words read, and concise reactions to each title (Furukawa et al. 2007). The aim of the reading logs was to keep track of the amount and levels of students' ER. They were mainly used to see how much reading the students accomplished. Also, the logs were used to decide when to move on to the next higher levels of graded readers (for English language learners) or leveled readers (for English-speaking children learning to read). The decision to read longer and more difficult books was made by the students themselves. The instructor occasionally encouraged the students who read many titles of one particular level of graded/leveled readers to attempt moving up to a higher level. In either case, the students were told to continuously read easier and shorter books to keep up their momentum.

During the in-class reading time, or sustained silent reading period, I had conferences with some of the students about their progress, choice of books, and also about any questions they might have concerning ER. The in-class conferences with one student lasted for 3 to 5 minutes each class or every two classes.

It was my concern as the instructor and researcher, whether I was able to detect reading problems the students had while continuing ER. At the beginning of the ER class, some students worried at the start if there would be "any" English books they could actually read. By providing them with very short books with plenty of illustrations and very few words at the outset, as well as the easiest levels of graded readers, most students found that ER without a dictionary was indeed possible. However, by observing the students actually reading in class, it became quite obvious that they found ER not always easy or fun, and sometimes seemed to find it difficult and tiring. In their weekly in-class comment sheets (see Appendix 2), some students expressed difficulty or fatigue, most of the time without commenting on what exactly their specific problems were. "Difficult" or "I got tired" were the only comments they wrote. Also, some students were restless and did not seem engaged in reading. In addition to talking directly to students and providing guidance, I administered an open-ended questionnaire (see

Appendix 3) asking them to write about what they found difficult in ER, in hopes of getting a better picture of the situation.

Findings

Five main reasons for difficulty

From the collected data, five main concepts surrounding difficulties in ER emerged: length of books, vocabulary, illustrations, genres, and background knowledge. These five main reasons for difficulty sometimes overlapped with each other, and there were some contradictory or different views as well. Typical examples of students' comments translated from Japanese to English will be cited in turn.

Length of books

The most common comments were about the length of the books. The students kept records of the words and titles they had read in the reading notebooks and also reported them in the written comments on weekly in-class sessions, so they were very aware of the length of the books they were reading.

- "Long stories are hard to read."

- "I get sleepy when I try to read books of over 2,000 words."

What particular students meant by "long stories" varied and changed according to the amount of ER they had accomplished. During the first semester, it was not infrequent that some said books with even 100 or 500 words were "long and difficult." For more advanced readers, it was 2,000 or

4,000 words. The students were more concerned with the length of the books than the levels of the books.

There are, however, contradictory comments from some other students who do not go the short picture book route.

- "Very short stories are often difficult to understand. I prefer longer ones."

This comment overlaps with another comment in the second category of words used. Most short titles with fewer than 400 words are leveled readers or picture books aimed at English-speaking children. Such stories have a lot of illustrations helpful in grasping the meaning, but Japanese EFL learners are not familiar with some of the words or expressions used. Since contextual clues cannot be used in such very short stories, some students find longer graded readers geared toward English language learners easier to read.

Vocabulary

It is quite understandable that the students are concerned with unknown words. The students with very limited vocabulary have trouble reading and quite often students stop reading books that are way above their reading levels. One such comment reflects this feeling.

- "I get stuck when I encounter several unknown words."

Since the students are encouraged to skip unknown words and continue to read if they can grasp the general meaning of the story, after a few class sessions they stop worrying too much about unfamiliar or unknown words. But as one student wrote in the above example, if they encounter

"several" unknown words, unknown word after unknown word, that is naturally a significant problem.

The next comment is related to the first category "lengths of books"

• "Books with very few words usually have a lot of unknown words, so I don't like picture books."

As mentioned in the previous section, some students found picture books for native English speaking children harder to read, even though those books were much shorter and looked very easy. This particular student seemed to opt not to read picture books at all.

It was interesting to note one student who expressed difficulty with names.

• "Stories with exotic names of people or places are difficult to read."

What this particular student meant by "exotic names" were names unfamiliar to him and which he found difficult to pronounce. This was after he tried reading an African (Ashanti) folk tale, with such names as "Nyame" and "Anansi." Some students also expressed difficulty in reading books about different kinds of dinosaurs, such as "Tyrannosaurus rex" and "Apatasaurus." The species of dinosaurs were described in books but the students seemed put off by those unfamiliar and hard-to-pronounce words. During the ER class, a few students asked the instructor to pronounce those words. When I asked the students if they liked reading the books on dinosaurs, their replies were negative. On the other hand, the students who reported that they enjoyed the same books did not ask for clarification in pronunciation. Fluent readers might not worry too much even if they cannot pronounce some of the names in a book, whereas slow readers often "silently read aloud" each individual word to themselves in their head. It is plausible that the words they cannot pronounce are where they get stuck in reading.

Illustrations

Students are provided with various kinds of books: picture books and very short leveled readers for children that are published in English-speaking countries as well as very short graded readers. Those books have many illustrations. The following comments do not mention difficulty in ER, but they were written in reply to the question about it.

• "A lot of illustrations mean fewer words, so I definitely go for picture books."

This overlaps with the difficulty in reading longer texts. It can be assumed that pictures help reading comprehension, but this comment emphasizes the number of words in the books. In order to avoid reading longer reading materials, this particular student was more interested in picture books.

• "I want to read books with colorful and attractive illustrations."

Beautiful illustrations were definitely a plus for some students. For example, one student elected to pick titles with colorful illustrations from the same short novel series.

• "With illustrations, I can check my understanding so it's hard to read books without them."

This particular student was reading longer graded readers with illustrations every three or four pages. The above comment was in response to a recommendation to try a new series of books that were supposed to be easier and shorter with no illustrations at all. His comment is interesting in that the student was not relying on pictures when reading, but used them to check his understanding.

Genres

When asked about the difficulties the students had while reading, some students replied by writing about their likes and dislikes of certain genres.

• "I don't like biographies, stories about people I don't know."

• "I like non-fiction stories and never want to read fantasies."

• "There aren't many books I want to read. I like love stories and books about sports."

The students obviously had some titles in mind when they wrote answers: the books they failed to read simply because they did not like them. And they attributed the reasons they had difficulty in reading to the genres of the books. I have often noticed, if they were really interested, the students could actually read longer and more difficult books.

Background knowledge

Reading books for new information is one of the advantages of ER and any kind of reading, but many students expressed a preference to books about familiar topics or stories. In fact, classic folk tales were quite popular among the students in ER class. The Japanese students often chose classic tales they already knew, or books they had already read in Japanese before. The book titles adapted from screenplays also attracted students.

• "The books based on the movies I have seen are so easy and fun to read. I think I should read about something I already know."

I cited the above example because this student emphasized his wish to read about something he already knew, as opposed to the general tendency among teachers to hope their students read for new information or read to learn new things.

• "Who's Merlin? What's Noah's Ark?"

These questions were asked directly to the instructor in class while the students were reading the particular book that contained this information. The students had not finished the book yet, but they seemed to notice there was something missing in their background knowledge. It was clear that "Merlin" and "Noah's Ark" should be known to readers of those books in order to enjoy the stories.

Other factors

The following comments are worth mentioning.

• "I don't like very vague endings and surprising endings. They are usually hard to understand."

As this student wrote in his weekly comments at the end of the ER class, some students actually asked me after

finishing reading certain books for an explanation of the plot resolution as they could not understand the endings. Those books often had mysterious endings leaving the readers to guess or imagine what actually happened at the end. My students seemed to prefer the questions or troubles that were depicted in the books to be solved rather than unsolved at the end.

• "Conversations are easy to read. I want to read books with a lot of dialogues."

The above student was reading relatively higher levels of graded readers, with a limited amount of illustrations. When he chose a book, he would look for spaces on book pages to make sure that stories contained a lot of dialogue.

The pleasures and pains of ER

Difficulty about difficulty

As I was collecting and analyzing the data with the aim of detecting what students actually found difficult about ER and why, it became clearer to me that the question about difficulty in reading was easy to ask but difficult to answer. It seemed that students were unwilling to talk about their difficulties with reading. Furthermore, it seemed even more difficult for them to explain why. I posed the question verbally only after they got accustomed to ER, more than two months after they started, yet the students were not good at articulating their challenges and obstacles while reading relatively short and easy English materials. This tendency was more evident among the slower readers in class. Some students opted not to write at all on the questionnaire.

There could be several reasons for this. For one thing, struggling readers were probably afraid to fail the class so they were unwilling to report their reading difficulties. Another reason could be that they wanted to please the instructor and were hesitant to write anything critical or negative. However, when those weak readers did not answer questions specifically asking about their difficulties or dislikes about reading, the main reason would be their being unable to explain the difficulties. It might be difficult for struggling readers to discern why they are having trouble reading at all, even when giving their feedback in Japanese.

Furthermore, I also realized that the students tended to write what they liked about ER. Instead of writing about what kinds of books they found difficult or what they disliked, students were more willing to write about the books they liked. As shown in the above results from the students' comments and my observations, some students stated what they preferred to read. It could be interpreted that, by expressing what they enjoyed or liked about ER books, they were probably trying to express indirectly what they did not enjoy or their difficulties in reading. Also, it is probable that reading difficulties could only be seen in contrast to the pleasures of reading.

Reasons for the pleasures of reading

In conclusion, the five main concepts for difficulties or pains in ER can be seen also as attributes of the pleasures of ER. As shown in the previous section, the students often wrote what they enjoyed and liked about reading English books.

- Length of books

- Vocabulary

- Illustrations

- Genres

- Background knowledge

To sum up the five reasons for the pleasures of ER, the students found it fun and pleasurable to read relatively short stories within their linguistic abilities with few unfamiliar words, and also with attractive illustrations to guide their reading and understanding. They also would like to read books of their favorite genres and books that have them draw on their background knowledge.

Conclusion

The qualitative analysis revealed five main reasons for the pleasures and pains of ER. It also found that students could not explain very well what they found difficult in ER. Instead of articulating specific difficulties, the students frequently explained what they liked or enjoyed within their ER experience. The pedagogical implication is that students should benefit more from focusing on what they like and what they enjoy in ER, rather than focusing on the difficulties in reading. By looking at the pleasures of ER, especially by noticing what they enjoy reading and what kinds of books they like, the instructor can provide them with their favorite types of books and the students will be able to overcome the challenges and difficulties they face in extensive reading.

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Appendix 1

Sample of students' reading log

No.	Date	Title	Series	Words	Comments
101	June 26	Clifford Takes a Trip	Clifford	400	New series but quite interesting
102	June 26	Sarah's Surprise	FRL 1	536	Relatively good
103	July 2	Go Jimmy Go!	FRL 4	1,347	Good story
102	July 2	Flying Home	PGR Starter	1,000	Very good
105	July 2	Vanishing Cream	ORT 5	313	Short and good
106	July 3	King Arthur	OBW Starter	1,500	Easy to read and interesting
107	July 3	Boys vs. Girls	FRL 5	1,746	They went a bit too far
108	July 3	Give Us the Money	OBW Starter	700	I enjoyed reading it.
109	July 3	A Good Friend	FRL 3	923	Nice story
110	July 3	Mystery on the Island	FRL 4	1,420	Couldn't expect such ending.

Series: FRL = Foundations Reading Library; OBW = Oxford Bookworm Library; ORT = Oxford Reading Tree

Note: Comments were originally written in Japanese by the students.

Appendix 2

Sample of students' comments at the end of each class

Date	Comments
September 25th	I can now read faster without worrying too much about unfamiliar words. I plan to read more words in the fall semester, and not aim to read more number of books.
October 2nd	I need to distinguish who is talking in the dialogue. When I read two longer titles in a row, I get tired. I need to switch between short books and longer books.
October 9th	I gave up reading one book because it was difficult. It was good that Oxford Bookworms Library was quite easy to read.
October 16th	Love stories are easy to understand and interesting, but their endings are quite predictable. Even picture books contain difficult words. Dialogues are easy to read.
October 23rd	I could concentrate on the video (Clifford the Big Red Dog) because the story was good. I couldn't follow the CD when I wondered the meaning of the sentences. Dialogues were easy to understand because I had already watched the video
November 6th	I read GOAL II while listening to the CD up to the chapter 7 and read the rest without the CD. It was about succor and I already watched the DVD. So it was very easy to understand. With CDs, I can read faster and understand better.

Note: Comments were originally written in Japanese by the students.

Appendix 3

Questions in the questionnaire

1. What do you find difficult in extensive reading?

    (多読で大変なところ、難しいことは何ですか?)

2. What kinds of books do you find difficult to read? Or what kinds of books do you avoid reading?

    どのような本が読みにくいと感じますか? または、どのような本を読みたくないですか?)

Note: Questions were asked in Japanese.

Appendix 4

Series of leveled and graded readers for extensive reading used in the classroom

(1) Leveled readers series

Oxford Reading Trees. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

I Can Read Books. New York: HarperCollins.

Scholastic Readers. New York: Scholastic.

Leveled Readers. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

(2) Graded readers series

Foundations Reading Library. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.

Macmillan Readers. Oxford: Macmillan.

Penguin Readers. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Longman.

Cambridge English Readers: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oxford Bookworm Library. Oxford: Oxford University Press.