

# An approach to extensive reading: Active involvement during sustained silent reading

Hiroko Yoshida

Osaka University of Economics

A number of studies have demonstrated that extensive reading (ER) can result in a variety of language learning gains; however, how ER programs should best be implemented in the EFL classroom has not been fully explored. This article provides practical advice to instructors in this regard and asserts the effectiveness of active involvement in sustained silent reading (SSR) to foster ER learning.

多読の有用性については多くの研究で報告されているが、授業で実際に多読を実施する最良の指導法については十分に議論されていない。本論では、この観点において教師に実践的な助言を施し、教師が授業内多読に積極的にかわり持続的黙読(SSR)を行うことの有効性について述べる。

In Japan, an increasing number of higher education institutions have incorporated extensive reading (ER) into their curricula; however, some of these practices have unexpectedly resulted in disappointing outcomes, despite the dedication of the instructors. Although the 10 principles for teaching ER proposed by Day and Bamford (1998, 2002) are well recognized among instructors, they do not provide sufficient information on how ER instruction should be implemented. This article explains how a combination of responsive guidance and explicit help during sustained silent reading (SSR) can be implemented by instructors to foster ER learning.

## Sustained silent reading

SSR was originally defined as “a daily established period of time during the school day when all students and their teachers read silently” (Manning, Lewis, & Lewis, 2010). It is used as part of a reading curriculum or extracurricular activity intended to promote ER. The goal of SSR is to foster a positive reading attitude by instilling enjoyment in reading. Although many other terms are used to describe this activity such as silent reading time, independent reading, self-selected reading, voluntary reading, exposure to text, and leisure reading (Lewis, 2002), one common characteristic is to have learners read materials that they want to read.

Conventionally during SSR, learners' reading is not interrupted for any purpose by the instructor. However, Grabe (2009) has stressed the importance of the instructor's taking an active role to help struggling learners during SSR. Although Grabe called this practice “free-reading time,” this article maintains the term “SSR” since it has been more widely used. More specifically, this article defines SSR as “reading in situations where the instructor can circulate and provide help, answer questions, and encourage students who are reading material of their own choice.”

## Merits of SSR

SSR can add substantially to the value of an ER program. First, it enables learners to secure a certain amount of reading time. As Robb (2002) and Takase (2010) have suggested, Japanese university students lead busy lives, because they must take a number of required and elective classes, work part-time jobs, and engage in club and social activities. For students who cannot allocate sufficient time to reading outside the classroom, SSR in the classroom is essential to becoming engaged in ER.

Second, during SSR, instructors can observe students' reading progress in every class. Principle No. 6 of Day and Bamford (1998, 2002) is that "Reading is its own reward." This may well ultimately be correct; however, it may be a long-term rather than an immediate goal. For most learners of English in Japanese universities, the instructor must make an intensive effort to induce them to read willingly during SSR. This requires acts of guidance such as checking students' reading and offering appropriate advice on the amount they read and their reading speed. Assigning reading logs to students can also provide a basis for appropriate feedback. (See Appendix A for an example.)

In my own class, I use a simple reading log: students fill in the number of books read, date read, book title, publisher, word count of an individual book and total word count that the student has read, book difficulty level (i.e., *Yomiyasusa Level* (YL)), the amount of time required to read the book, and a few words of commentary (Appendix A). The YL shows the difficulty level of a given reader. In ER, what complicates the selection of books for novice readers is often the grading or labeling of readers by reading level, since grading schemata may vary considerably. For example, different publishers use different words to describe easy readers, such as "Starter," "Level 0," "Basic," or "Elementary." Aside from the terms used, difficulty levels themselves also vary by publisher. To address this problem, the YL was developed to provide a single consistent metric for grading readers published by different publishers; it ranges from 0.0 to 10.0 and thus allows grading into 101 levels. For example, YL 0.0 indicates picture books without words, except for the title on the cover, whereas YL 10.0 indicates the most difficult readers for English learners (Furukawa, 2006, 2012).

## The early stage of SSR

At the beginning stage of SSR, the focus of instruction should be on whether students read regularly and select books that are suitable for their reading level. If the reading log has not been filled in since the previous class, it may mean that the student did not read outside class in the interim. The instructor must then provide appropriate help and encourage the student to read on a more regular basis. In my ER instruction experience, I have found that this type of coaching during SSR is invaluable for successful ER practice. When I begin ER activity in the course, I usually start with an orientation session at the library, where students learn why ER is beneficial and why it is used in the course; how reading logs are filled out; where graded readers, including children's books as well as simplified texts for learners, are located in the library; and how to check them out. This orientation enables most students to easily come to understand what is meant by ER practices and to start reading.

However, some students need further follow-up to grow accustomed to ER. According to Takase (2010), problematic ER readers can be divided into four types: (a) students who cannot concentrate on what they are reading during SSR; (b) students who stick to translating texts from the L2 to the L1 sentence by sentence, presumably because of their past English learning experience (i.e., experience with Grammar-Translation learning); (c) students who guess the book content by relying heavily on pictures or drawings in the text; and (d) readers who pretend to read the text without understanding the content. In addition to these, I would propose a fifth type of problematic readers: those who require a considerable amount of time and energy to become engaged in ER.

A series of coaching sessions during SSR, which I call "rounds" of feedback, is essential for identifying problematic readers and addressing the specific nature of their difficulties. In a round, instructors are required to carefully observe students, akin to physicians examining and treating their patients in hospital—checking their reading habits, diagnosing problems, and providing appropriate advice to resolve those problems. Yoshizawa, Takase, and Otsuki (2013) have shown the importance of appropriate advice from the instructor based on careful observation during SSR. Examples of coaching during the rounds are introduced in the Appendix C.

### Fostering independent extensive readers

Once learners have grown accustomed to ER, the next focus of instruction during SSR should be improving reading speed and choice (level) of graded readers. Even if students read a sufficient number of books every week, caution must be exercised to verify whether this reading actually constitutes beneficial ER, and in particular whether the specific books chosen are promoting it. Do students read at an appropriate speed? Do they read books from various series, or only one? To examine whether students read too quickly or too slowly, the instructor should pay attention to the word counts of books and the time required to finish reading them, which can be done by referring to the reading log. As Takase (2010) suggested, when a student's average reading speed reaches 100 to 120 words per minute, this generally shows that the student comprehends the text.

However, some students' reading speed is occasionally shown as "400 or above words per minute" in the log, far beyond the standard reading speed of EFL university students. This apparently indicates that the students only skimmed the book, without comprehending the content—a practice called *suberiyomi* "skipping reading" in Japanese, which should be avoided in ER learning. In contrast, if students read fewer than 100 words per minute, the instructor should advise them to select books of easier grade levels, under the presumption that the books they are presently reading are more difficult than their current reading level. When giving advice, it is advisable for teachers to provide encouraging suggestions rather than being too strict or blunt with their feedback, in order not to demotivate the students. This stance toward students is crucial during SSR, because no one enjoys reading under harsh or unpleasant conditions.

Even when students have grown accustomed to ER and have successfully engaged in reading in class, the instructor's role in the ER program does not end. Once a student's reading level reaches the threshold of the intermediate level, the instructor should encourage the student to take on the challenge of reading more widely, from various series. For example, the Oxford Reading Tree (ORT) series is composed of well-designed children's readers that are popular among students in the early stage of ER. However, if early ER practice involves books from the ORT series only, students may reach a plateau around YL 1.0, because only a limited number of ORT books are available above that level. Therefore, it is important for students to familiarize themselves with

graded readers of various kinds after becoming accustomed to extensive reading practice (approximately YL 0.5). Although Day and Bamford (1998, 2002) state that "Learners choose what they want to read" (Principle 3), "Teachers orient and guide their students," (Principle 9) is of greater importance for fledgling ER learners.

### In-class book hopping

At university, most English courses take place in a normal classroom, where graded readers are generally unavailable (in contrast to pre-university levels, where readers may be present in the classroom). Therefore, I generally bring my own graded readers to match the students' reading level on the basis of my sense of their abilities. Although they are encouraged to check out graded readers from the library and bring them to every class, students can also select books they want to read during SSR (see Appendix B). This book hopping is helpful because it enables students to read appropriate books whenever necessary or convenient, "on the spot." Moreover, the instructor can offer immediate advice to students in class if their checked-out books are deemed unsuitable for their level. This approach is also a good opportunity to show that "The teacher is a role model for the reader" (Principle 10; Day & Bamford 1998, 2002), in that the teacher can recommend books that s/he has read and enjoyed.

### Obstacles to SSR

The greatest obstacle to conducting rounds during SSR may be class size. When a class is relatively small, it is easier to conduct rounds. Shimamoto (2008) reported that 74% of ER is conducted in classes with fewer than 26 students. Yet, in my experience, if a class allows 20–30 minutes for SSR and the instructor sets additional tasks, such as more frequent submission of reading logs in order to regularly monitor students' reading, it is possible to conduct ER in larger classes of up to approximately 80 students. In addition to class size, the size of the physical classroom also greatly affects SSR management (Yoshida, 2013). A packed classroom is more challenging to move around during SSR than an emptier one (regardless of the absolute number of students). Controlling the number of students per class may be difficult, because it is determined by administrative considerations, but requesting larger classrooms may be feasible in the university setting where relatively extensive facilities are available.

## Conclusion

In ER instruction, as in other language-learning instruction, successful learning is not usually possible without an instructor, whose role is to carefully observe each student, encourage them, and recommend appropriate books (Furukawa, 2010). Thus, ER instruction must be flexible and dynamic depending on the characteristics of the target students and the context. This article explained the ways in which the instructor is actively involved during SSR. The degree to which the instructor should be involved in students' reading is not fixed but should instead be modified according to the situation. As students get accustomed to extensive reading practice, the number of interventions should be reduced to a minimum; yet at the early stage of ER, the instructor's active involvement during SSR through a combination of responsive guidance and explicit help can be a great facilitator of successful ER learning.

## References

- Day, R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Day, R., & Bamford, J. (2002). Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14.
- Retrieved from <nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/October2002/day/day.html.
- Furukawa, A. (2006). SSS extensive reading method proves to be an effective way to learn English. Retrieved from <seg.co.jp/sss/information/SSSER-2006.htm>
- Furukawa, A. (2010). Hensyuchō syuninni atatte [On my recent appointment as Journal of JERA Editor]. *Journal of Japan Extensive Reading Association*, 4, 1.
- Furukawa, A. (2012). Tadokuyōu kihontōsyōno syokai [Introducing basic books for extensive reading]. In SSS Eigotadokukenkūyukai (Ed.), *Dokusyōkirokutecho* [Reading record book] (pp. 68–84). Tokyo: Cosmopia.
- Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a second language: Moving from theory to practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, M. (2002). *Read more—read better? A meta-analysis of the literature on the relationship between exposure to reading and reading achievement* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.
- Manning, M., Lewis, M., & Lewis, M. (2010). Sustained silent reading: An update of the research. In E. H. Hiebert & D. R. Reutzel (Eds.), *Revisiting silent reading: New directions for teachers and researchers* (pp. 112–128). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Robb, T. (2002). Extensive reading in an Asian context—an alternative view. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14, 146–147.
- Shimamoto, T. (2008). Anketo chōsa kekka, daigaku [Results of questionnaire, at university]. In A. Yamazaki (Ed.), *Eigoryōkuwo takamerutameno tadokujūgyōno suishin* [Extensive reading to improve learners' English proficiency] (pp. 54–65). Yokohama, Japan: Musashikogyōdaigaku.
- Takase, A. (2010). *Eigo tadoku tacho shido manyūaru* [Manual for instructing extensive reading and listening]. Tokyo: Taisyukan.
- Yoshida, H. (2013, February). Detade miru daigaku eigo tadoku shidonō seika-4nenkannō ayumi [University extensive reading-4-year approaches]. Paper presented at the Kansai Tadoku Shido Seminar, Osaka University of Economics, Osaka.
- Yoshizawa, K., Takase, A., & Otsuki, K. (2013). The effect of a teacher's guidance on Japanese university EFL learners' voluntary reading outside class. *Journal of Kansai University Foreign Language Studies*, 8, 133–150.

## Appendices

Appendix A: *A sample of a student's reading log*, Appendix B: *Book hopping in a classroom*, and Appendix C: *Examples of coaching* are available in the online version of this article on our website at <jalt-publications.org/tlt/>

**Hiroko Yoshida** is Professor at Osaka University of Economics. She has an Ed.D. in Curriculum, Instruction and Technology in Education from Temple University, Philadelphia. Her research interests include extensive reading, language testing, vocabulary learning, and curriculum development.

