

Investigating High School Students' Self-Efficacy in Reading Circles

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The purpose of this quasi-experimental longitudinal study is to investigate the effects of EFL reading circles on Japanese high school students' reading self-efficacy and reading anxiety. The participants ($N = 316$), first-year students at a Japanese coeducational high school, participated in regular reading circles over the course of one academic year. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires measuring reading self-efficacy, reading anxiety, and attitudes towards reading circles. A repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to evaluate changes in reading self-efficacy and anxiety. Reading self-efficacy was shown to improve significantly over the course of the academic year, while reading anxiety significantly decreased. Reasons for these changes are discussed.

この特定の被験者に対する継続的実験研究の目的は、日本の高校生
の英文読解に対する自己効力感と不安感に、EFLリーディングサークルが
どのような効果をもたらすかについて調査することである。316人の被験
者は日本の男女共学の高校一年生であり、1年間を通して定期的にリー
ディングサークルに参加した。定量的データは、読解における自己効力感、
不安感、そしてリーディングサークルに対する態度を測る質問票から集計
されたものである。読解に対する自己効力感と不安感の変化を評価する
ために反復測定分散分析 (ANOVA) が行われた。1年の間に、読解に対す
る自己効力感は有意に向上し、不安感も有意に減少した。本論では、こ
ういった変化の理由についても論じている。

A great deal of research in reading motivation and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) supports the development of reading programs, yet they are not commonplace in Japanese high schools. Despite the push from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to include programs reflecting principals in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Tahira, 2012), many reading programs in high schools remain rooted in more traditional teaching methods, such as direct translation of texts or intensive reading for the purpose of preparing for university entrance examinations.

The reading treatment in this study, regular reading circles as part of first-year communication classes in a Japanese high school, was implemented as a way to address the lack of consistency between

national education guidelines and in-class activities. It was also a way of operationalizing the school's mandate to include more leadership training and autonomy through cooperative learning. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the students' motivational and behavioral changes towards reading as a result of introducing reading circles in the class.

Literature Review

Reading Circles in Language Education

Reading circles, also referred to as literature circles, were first adapted in language arts classrooms in the United States. Daniels (2002) describes reading circles as "small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book" (p. 1). Structured as a cooperative learning activity, students interact and discuss from the viewpoint of their individual role within the group. Initial guidelines introduced by Daniels (2002) promoted student autonomy in leading discussions and advised teachers to become facilitators in the classroom. This approach allows students to develop their interpretive skills in reading and their ability to approach texts from different perspectives while encouraging conversations about reading materials. In adapting the activity for EFL students in Japanese universities, Furr (2007) proposed modifying Daniels' guidelines for EFL learners, specifying that teachers should select reading materials so as to better match students' reading levels and that post-reading circle discussions can involve some language teaching activities to clarify parts of the story or facilitate discussion in the L2.

The roles in reading circles help learners explore different perspectives in reading text. Although there are variations in how to perform or divide these roles, the reading circles in this study were comprised of five roles: the discussion leader, the summarizer, the connector, the word master, and the passage person (Furr, 2007). The discussion leader directs the group discussion and makes sure

that each member participates. The summarizer outlines characters and events in a short summary. The connector recalls personal connections in the story or relates it to social or world events. The word master chooses five words in the text and explains their meaning in the context of the story. The passage person selects three passages, explains reasons for choosing them, and asks other members a few questions about the selected passages. The preparation and performance of these roles are supported with role sheets.

Research in L1 and ESL reading circles have reported positive results in advancing reading skills and reading level and in improving the classroom environment by increasing cooperation amongst the students, peer-learning, reading confidence, and self-efficacy (Kim, 2004; McElvain, 2010). Much of the research in the EFL context has focused on learners' reactions towards the activity (Mark, 2007; Williams, 2011). One study reported some benefits of reading circles as a means to developing reading fluency, increasing vocabulary knowledge, and improving speaking skills through the participants' self-evaluation (Shelton-Strong, 2012).

Reading Self-Efficacy and Anxiety

Self-efficacy has received attention most prominently in educational psychology. Bandura first developed his theory of self-efficacy (1977) and defined perceived self-efficacy as, "people's judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 2002, p. 94). The theory suggests that perceived self-efficacy has an effect on behaviour by directly regulating four major processes: cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes. Specifically, individuals who have highly perceived self-efficacy in achieving a task are more likely to initiate and regulate the required behaviour for successfully completing the given task. If problems occur in engaging in the behaviour, highly efficacious people persevere to overcome these problems and can manage stress and anxiety more efficiently in situations threatening the achievement of their goals by eliminating negative thought patterns leading to avoidant behaviour. In decision-making, individuals' self-perceived ability has a direct and indirect influence on whether to engage in a given task. Thus, learners with the same cognitive ability and skills set might behave very differently depending on their perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989, 1993).

Research in this area has demonstrated the important implications of self-efficacy theory in academic settings where learners' perceived self-efficacy has a direct and indirect effect on academic achievement (Caprara et al., 2008). Studies in EFL and perceived reading self-efficacy have observed a strong correlation between learners' reading self-efficacy and their use of reading strategies (Li & Wang, 2010). In a longitudinal study, Burrows (2012) reported positive effects of reading strategy training and extensive reading on learners' self-efficacy. Other veins of self-efficacy research have examined its relationship to anxiety, an important factor in many EFL motivation theories. Unlike self-efficacy, anxiety is mostly debilitating in task performance. A significant negative correlation between the two has been observed in a variety of academic domains (Woodrow, 2011), and both can predict academic proficiency. However in foreign language learning, the effects of self-efficacy and anxiety on proficiency may vary depending on the linguistic skill (Mills, Pajares & Herron, 2006).

To address the lack of empirical research investigating the effects of reading circles on EFL learners' reading self-efficacy and reading anxiety, the following three research questions were investigated:

- What are the effects of reading circles on students' reading self-efficacy?
- What are the effects of reading circles on students' reading anxiety?
- What are the students' attitudes towards reading circles?

Method

Participants

The study was conducted with first-year students at a Japanese coeducational high school ($N = 316$) in an English oral communication course. Although the students' proficiency and motivation for learning English varied, the school's curriculum focuses on preparing students for academic studies in post-secondary education.

Materials

Participants were assigned two teacher-selected graded reader books of short stories for the school year. The graded readers were from two publishing companies, and according to the Extensive Reading Foundation Graded Reader Level Scale (http://www.robwaring.org/er/scale/ERF_levels.htm), both are Elementary-level readers. Participants were given role sheets to assist them in preparing and performing tasks for the reading circle.

Instruments

Two sets of questionnaires were used in the study. The first questionnaire, Reading Self-Efficacy and Anxiety Questionnaire (Appendix A), consisted of 28 items. The first 18 items addressed participants' perceived reading self-efficacy (adapted from Burrows, 2012). Participants were asked to evaluate their perceived ability to complete specific reading tasks on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*I cannot do it at all*) to 6 (*I can definitely do it*). The following 10 items addressed reading anxiety. These items were statements expressing negative feelings in reading English text. Participants responded to the statements on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) (adapted from *Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Survey*, [Saito, Horwitz, & Garza, 1999]). The Reading Self-Efficacy and Anxiety Questionnaire was piloted with a group of 160 students in the previous school year and validated using the Rasch rating-scale model.

A second questionnaire measured the participants' reactions toward reading circles. The questionnaire had 13 items evaluated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*) and eight open-ended questions (adapted from Williams, 2011), which participants answered in Japanese.

Both questionnaires were translated from English into Japanese, and back translated into English to verify consistency.

Procedure

The reading circle activities and data collection took place in the participants' oral communication class taught by a Japanese teacher of English (JTE) and an assistant language teacher (ALT). Each class consisted of 20 students, 18 intact classes. The participating teachers (six JTE, two ALT) were given two orientation sessions to familiarize themselves with the goals and procedures for the reading circles and data collection.

The Reading Self-Efficacy and Anxiety Questionnaire was administered in the second oral communication class followed by an orientation session. Groups were formed at the teachers' discretion and materials were distributed. Reading and preparation for reading circles were assigned as homework. In their first reading circle meeting, teachers reviewed the tasks for each role and gave discussion leaders a performance checklist including linguistic cues to help facilitate group discussion. The same procedure was repeated a total of eight times over the course of one academic year. The schedule of activities is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Schedule of Data Collection and Reading Circle Meetings

	First Semester (April-September)	Second Semester (October-February)
Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First data collection • Orientation • Meetings 1-4 • Second data collection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings 5-8 • Third data collection

Results

Reading Self-Efficacy and Anxiety

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for reading self-efficacy and reading anxiety for each interval. The means for reading self-efficacy increased between each interval whereas those for reading anxiety decreased between times 1 and 2 and increased again between times 2 and 3.

Table 2. Reading Self-Efficacy and Reading Anxiety Means for each Interval (N = 316)

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
SE	47.10*	6.71	48.15*	6.48	48.58*	7.37
ANX	50.84*	3.11	50.28*	3.20	50.44	3.40

Note. SE = Self-efficacy, ANX = Anxiety. The statistics are based on Rasch person measures.

**p* < .05

Repeated-measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed to investigate changes in reading self-efficacy and reading anxiety. Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity was not met, $\chi^2(2) = 33.35, p < .0001$, therefore the degrees of freedom were corrected using Huynh-Feldt estimates ($\epsilon = .91$). The results indicated a significant increase in reading self-efficacy between times 1 and 2, and times 1 and 3, $F(2, 576) = 11.5, p < .05$, but the increase was insignificant between times 2 and 3 ($p = .15$). As for reading anxiety, there was a significant drop between times 1 and 2, and times 1 and 3, $F(2, 619) = 7.6, p < .05$, but no significant change between times 2 and 3.

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Attitudes towards reading circles

The means from the questionnaire evaluating attitudes towards reading circles are shown in Table 3. The questionnaire was administered during the second interval, thus only results for times 2 and 3 are reported.

Table 3. Means for Attitudes Towards Reading Circles Items ($N = 316$)

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Items 1-7	-	-	50.67	11.35	49.07	13.83
Items 8-13	-	-	54.14	11.48	53.14	12.63

Note. Items 1-7 = perceived enjoyment of reading circles; Items 8-13 = perceived usefulness of reading circles.

Results from a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) show slight decreases in the means for both sets of items; however, neither was significant (items 1-7, $p = .11$, items 8-13, $p = .30$). Although participants perceived the activity as useful, their level of enjoyment did not change significantly over the academic year.

Discussion and Limitations

The increase in reading self-efficacy and decrease in reading anxiety over one academic year can be explained considering sources of self-efficacy and the task structure. Sources of self-efficacy come from mastery or success experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic (i.e., association of physical signs of anxiety to ability, for example experiencing *having butterflies*) and emotional states (i.e., recalling past memories of success or failure) (Bandura, 1977). The first three sources of self-efficacy are accounted for in reading circles.

First, the most influential source of efficacy is mastery experiences (Bandura, 1977). The formation of mastery experiences is embedded in the activity's structure. In a reading circle, students are exposed to the process of reading and interpretation of text through direct experience as opposed to a teacher-led class during which the text is dissected and presented to students. In this study, students may not have experienced immediate success in interpreting and discussing the text, but by overcoming this failure through individual and group effort, they experienced mastery in performing the reading

tasks. Individually, students read the text, considered what points to highlight in discussion, and reread some parts. In the open-ended questions on the attitudes questionnaire, participants reported that reading circles helped them with in-depth understanding of the text with comments such as “[reading circles are an] ideal way to comprehend the content [of the story]” <Student 12> or “I think it is good that in addition to reading English text and coming to understand it on my own, I had to be able to talk and write about the content” <Student 78>. In groups, students then revisited the text through summary, comprehension questions, and discussion questions. This type of scaffolding activity guides learners through the steps in performing the task successfully and steadily removes the teacher from the position of expert (Woodrow, 2011). Many comments acknowledged this aspect of the reading circles (e.g., “By talking in groups, I could understand the content [of the story]” <Student 136>). Thus, compared to a more traditional reading class, students had opportunities to interact with the text meaningfully through repeated practice and review using all four skills.

Secondly, another source of efficacy comes from vicarious experiences. One's perceived efficacy in a given task can be increased by observing another individual perform the same task successfully. By working in small groups and as a whole class in post-reading circle discussions, students could witness peers performing the tasks and listen to other students' contributions outside of their group. From the students' comments (e.g., “I could understand better because there were various opinions and the story could be seen from different angles” <Student 234>; “It was troublesome sometimes, but because there are other team members, I thought I should try my best” <Student 303>), it seems that observing other group members helped some participants in their comprehension and sustained their motivation to participate. Bandura (1977) explained that diversified modeling is more beneficial to self-efficacy than a single model. If students of various abilities successfully complete reading circle tasks, observing students have a sound reason to believe that they can also perform the tasks and may feel less anxious about their own performance.

Third, social persuasion and words of encouragement from teachers and peers can help increase one's perceived efficacy. Participant teachers in the study were instructed to keep a positive atmosphere in class and give positive feedback to creative or insightful comments. In addition, discussion leaders in each group had a list of phrases to help direct the discussion, including phrases showing encour-

agement to other members. Social persuasion in the classroom may have also helped relieve anxiety by creating a tolerant environment. This aspect of the activity was illuminated by the numerous comments reporting the enjoyment of interacting with peers (e.g., "It was fun because of the positive atmosphere" <Student 427>). However, results from the questionnaire investigating participants' perceived enjoyment showed a slight decrease over time; therefore, more qualitative data could shed light into what aspects of the activity are motivating or taxing for high school learners.

Participants' reading anxiety decreased over one academic year. As the students became successful in completing the reading circle tasks, the threat of performing general reading tasks became less affecting. This idea is particularly relevant to this group of learners who might have had expectations and a sense of uncertainty about the type of learning they would encounter in high school. In the attitudes questionnaire, many students expressed concern about their ability to read in English and were anxious about being able to do the tasks. This uncertainty was reflected in comments like "I was anxious about being able to do it myself" <Student 132> or "I felt that junior high school and high school are very different" <Student 340>. However, the same students reported that in comparison to other classroom activities, reading circles had helped them overcome these insecurities (e.g., "I could read stories in depth" <Student 132>; "Since it is possible to consult with people in my group, I could make more new discoveries than when I work alone" <Student 340>).

Although insignificant, the results do show a slight increase in both self-efficacy and anxiety in the last interval. This shift may be explained by some of the study's limitations. First, although the program spanned one academic year and all groups had a total of eight reading circle sessions, the meetings took place rather sporadically in the second semester due to the school's two-week rotating timetable. Therefore, studies looking at time-lapse between group meetings could give insight into the effects of cooperative class activities on changing levels of self-efficacy and anxiety.

Secondly, due to institutional constraints, a control group could not be introduced in the study. As is the case in many public schools, all students must follow the curriculum set by the English department for required courses, and no special treatment can be given to a group of students. This dilemma introduces validity issues for generalization of results; however, it does reflect the reality of assessing the implementation of specialized programs in a

real classroom environment. Teachers involved in the program were inquisitive of its effects and wanted to understand them through a principled research framework. Thus, a methodology following the Action Research (AR) model, including more in-class observations and reflection by teachers and participants may have better suited the realities of the research environment. Nonetheless, empirical studies investigating EFL reading circles and its effects will hopefully add to the growing discussion of their use in classrooms.

Conclusion

The study presented in this article reports the positive effects on Japanese high school learners' reading self-efficacy and anxiety as a result of a yearlong program implementing reading circles. Task repetition and cooperative performance in the circles helped improve students' perceived reading efficacy over the course of an academic year while reading anxiety decreased. Further statistical analysis of questionnaire items could clarify what types of reading tasks benefit most from transferability. Future research from both practical and empirical perspectives, exploring regularity and time-lapse between reading circles, and reading circle's task structure and demand could help researchers and practitioners understand the role of reading circles in EFL classrooms.

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Appendix A

Reading Self-efficacy and Anxiety Questionnaire (English version)

Please use the following scale (1–6) to answer the questions. Choose the number that best describes how sure you are that you can perform each of the English reading tasks below. All of the items refer to reading in English.

1	2	3	4	5	6
I cannot do it at all.	I probably cannot do it.	Maybe I cannot do it.	Maybe I can do it.	I probably can do it.	I can definitely do it.

1	Read and understand the specific details of a pre-school children’s book written in English.	1 2 3 4 5 6
2	Read and understand the days of the week on a calendar written in English.	1 2 3 4 5 6
3	Read and understand the names of the months on a calendar written in English.	1 2 3 4 5 6
4	Read and understand the plot of a 20-page comic book written for English-speaking junior high or high school students.	1 2 3 4 5 6
5	Read and understand the lyrics of a song written in English.	1 2 3 4 5 6
6	Read and understand the directions (written in English) on how to use a new electronic dictionary.	1 2 3 4 5 6
7	Read and understand the specific details of a letter from an American pen-pal discussing what he did over his summer vacation.	1 2 3 4 5 6

8	Read and understand the English subtitles in an American movie.	1 2 3 4 5 6
9	Read and understand the specific details of a one-page magazine article written in English related to one of your hobbies (i.e., fashion, sports, music, movies).	1 2 3 4 5 6
10	Read and understand the main point of a front-page article in a newspaper published in an English-speaking country.	1 2 3 4 5 6
11	Read and understand the items on a menu written in English at a fast-food restaurant.	1 2 3 4 5 6
12	Read and understand the main point of an article in a newspaper published in an English speaking country that is written about a famous person you know.	1 2 3 4 5 6
13	Read and understand the specific details (ex: time, place) of a party invitation written in English.	1 2 3 4 5 6
14	Read and understand the main ideas of an academic essay written in English related to your favorite school subject.	1 2 3 4 5 6
15	Read and understand the rules to play a boardgame written in English.	1 2 3 4 5 6
16	Read and understand the main ideas in a novel (~120 pages) written for English-speaking adults.	1 2 3 4 5 6
17	Read and understand the specific details of a paragraph written in an English high school textbook.	1 2 3 4 5 6
18	Read and understand the specific details in a short story (5 pages) written for English-speaking adults.	1 2 3 4 5 6

Note. Adapted from Burrows (2012)

Please use the following scale (1-6) to answer the questions. Choose the number that best describes how you feel about reading in English.

1	2	3	4	5	6
strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree

19	I get upset when I'm not sure whether I understand what I am reading in English.	1 2 3 4 5 6
20	When reading English, I often understand the words but still can't quite understand what the author is saying.	1 2 3 4 5 6
21	I feel intimidated whenever I see a whole page of English in front of me.	1 2 3 4 5 6
22	I am nervous when I am reading a passage in English when I am not familiar with the topic.	1 2 3 4 5 6
23	I get upset whenever I encounter unknown grammar when reading English.	1 2 3 4 5 6
24	It bothers me to encounter words I can't pronounce while reading English.	1 2 3 4 5 6
25	I usually end up translating word by word when I'm reading English.	1 2 3 4 5 6
26	The hardest part of learning English is learning to read.	1 2 3 4 5 6
27	I don't mind reading to myself, but I feel very uncomfortable when I have to read aloud.	1 2 3 4 5 6
28	You have to know so much about English history and culture in order to read English.	1 2 3 4 5 6

Note. Adapted from FLRAS (Saito, Horwitz, & Garza, 1999)

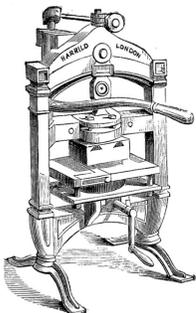
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