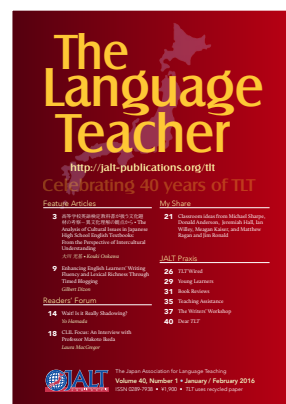


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Investigating the Effects of Short In-class Extensive Reading on Improving English Proficiency

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This study investigated the effects of short in-class extensive reading (ER) on English proficiency. The participants ($N = 322$) were first-year Japanese students at a private women's university. The ER group ($n = 160$) did 20 minutes of ER once a week. The control group ($n = 162$) dedicated 20 minutes to a dictogloss every other week. In the remaining class time, both groups received task-based language teaching instruction. English proficiency tests were also administered at the beginning and the end of the academic year. The results of a mixed design MANOVA showed that both groups significantly improved their vocabulary and reading comprehension scores over the year but there were no differences in the gains made by the two groups. These findings suggest that short in-class ER might be effective in developing vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension skills but does not yield significantly better effects than dictogloss.

本論は授業時に短時間行う多読学習 (ER) が英語熟達度の伸びに及ぼす効果を明らかにすることを目的とする。参加者は日本の私立女子大学1年生322名である。多読群 ($n = 160$) は毎週1回20分間の多読学習を行い、統制群 ($n = 162$) は隔週で20分間のディクトグロスを行った。多読・ディクトグロス以外の時間は両群とも同じカリキュラム (TBLT) に基づく英語学習を行った。また、学年の始めと終わりにプレースメントテストを実施し、そのスコアを英語熟達度の伸びの指標として使用した。二元配置多変量分散分析の結果、両群とも年間を通じて読解力・語彙力を伸ばしているが、両群の英語熟達度の伸びには差がないことが明らかになった。このことから、授業時に短時間行う多読学習は読解力・語彙力を伸ばすのに効果的であり得るものの、ディクトグロスよりも英語力を伸ばす効果が高いとは言えないことが示された。

Extensive reading (ER) with graded readers has become increasingly popular in Japanese higher educational institutions. Although one of the top ten characteristics of successful ER stipulates that “*Students read as much as possible*” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 7, italics in the original), it is sometimes difficult to allocate a large amount of time for ER due to other requirements in the English learning curriculum. As a result, some institutions may only spare part of the class time (e.g., one-third or one-fourth of a class) for ER using graded readers. The present study aims to examine the effects of short in-class ER on the development of English proficiency in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting.

The Effects of Extensive Reading on English Proficiency

Although ER is defined as “reading in quantity ... in order to gain a general understanding of what is read” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 193), the conceptualization of ER varies considerably between different researchers (Waring & McLean, 2015). The present study adopts the definition of ER put forth by Waring and McLean (2015, p. 165), who have suggested the following to be the core ER elements:

- Fluent, sustained comprehension of text as meaning-focused input
- Large volume of material
- Reading over extended periods of time
- Longer texts, requiring comprehension at the discourse level

ER has positive effects on the development of various English proficiencies including reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge, which are the primary areas of focus in the present study. For example, Yamashita (2008) demonstrated that over one semester, ER conducted both inside and outside the classroom had significantly improved Japanese university EFL students' reading ability ($N = 31$). Takase and Otsuki (2012) also reported that a semester of in-class ER increased remedial students' reading proficiency at a Japanese university ($N = 81$). Furthermore, Horst (2005) found that after a 6-week ER program, the vocabulary knowledge of adult ESL learners in Canada ($N = 21$) had increased. ER's efficacy was also reported in other studies (e.g., Hayashi, 1999; Lai, 1993). Although the positive effects of ER on learning outcomes are evident, these studies do not have a control group; it is therefore unclear whether the gains are solely attributed to ER.

Studies with control groups have also shown significant gains in the aforementioned areas but the superiority of ER over the other pedagogical approaches has been equivocal. Some researchers have shown that ER groups improved learners' reading comprehension significantly more than non-ER

counterparts. For example, Bell (2001) investigated the effects of in-class and out-of-class ER over two academic semesters in Yemen ($N = 26$) and found that the ER group outperformed the intensive reading group in both reading speed and reading comprehension. Sheu (2003) examined the effects of in-class ER over an academic year with Taiwanese junior high school students and showed that students who did ER with graded readers had better developed vocabulary and reading comprehension than the other students.

On the contrary, some studies have shown that gains in reading comprehension were not differentiated between an ER group and a control group. For example, Nakanishi and Ueda (2011) demonstrated in an EFL setting with Japanese university learners ($N = 89$) that although year-long in-class and out-of-class ER improved the reading comprehension of two ER groups, the two control groups also showed similar gains in reading comprehension. Matsui and Noro (2010) found that 10 minutes of in-class ER significantly improved reading speed and reading comprehension of both the experimental and the control groups of Japanese EFL junior high school students ($N = 122$). The superiority of the ER group over the experimental group, however, was observed in reading speed but not in reading comprehension.

Thus far, research on the superiority of ER over the other instructional approaches has yielded mixed results. Furthermore, the efficacy of *short* in-class ER on English proficiency has scarcely been investigated. To address this gap in the literature, the present study investigates the following research questions:

1. To what extent does short in-class ER improve English proficiency?
2. Is short in-class ER more effective than dictogloss in improving English proficiency?

Method

Participants

The participants ($N = 327$) were first-year students at a private women's university in Japan and were majoring in child science ($n = 193$) or psychology ($n = 134$). They took three mandatory English classes per week (90 minutes per session), which were taught by three EFL instructors. The classes were taught using task-based language teaching (TBLT) with *Interchange Intro* (Richards, 2005) and *Touchstone Level 1* (McCarthy, McCarten, & Sandiford, 2005) as the main textbooks. Two intact

freshmen cohorts from different academic years acted as the ER and control groups. The ER group ($n = 163$) engaged in 20-minute ER once a week in the 2010 academic year, which was when ER was first incorporated into the university's English curriculum. The control group ($n = 164$) dedicated 20 minutes for a dictogloss every other week in the 2009 academic year. Their initial proficiency level ranged from 65 to 263 on the Assessment of Communicative English (ACE) placement test, with a mean score of 134.13 ($SD = 29.78$). The score of 140 on the placement test is estimated to be equivalent to a score above 340 on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Furthermore, learners who passed Eiken Grade 3 Level had an average score of 150 on the placement test (ELPA, 2015). Thus, the participants of the present study had relatively low English proficiency.

Instrument

As a measure of the participants' English proficiency, ACE placement tests (versions 0277 and 0328) were conducted at the beginning and the end of the academic year. The ACE placement test was developed by the Association for English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA), which provides educational institutions (e.g., junior and senior high schools and universities) with four types of English proficiency tests. It targets learners with Eiken Grades 2 to 3 or who have TOEIC scores between 300 and 700. The assessment consists of three sections (listening, vocabulary and grammar, and reading) with a total maximum score of 300. Scores in the listening and reading sections range from 0 to 100. Vocabulary and grammar section is further classified into two parts (vocabulary and grammar, each of which range in scores from 0 to 50). The learner's English proficiency is estimated using data from over 200,000 test takers using the item response theory (ELPA, n.d.).

Procedure

Tests

The pretest was conducted at the beginning of the academic year in April as part of an English course placement for the first-year English courses; the posttest was administered in January at the end of the academic year for placement in the second-year English courses. The results of the posttest were also used as part of the students' final course grade. Participation in the tests was mandatory for all students.

ER group

The ER group ($n = 163$) from the 2010 academic year did in-class ER once a week for about 20 minutes, starting in Week 6 and ending in Week 27. There was no ER in Weeks 14–16 and 28–30 due to other requirements in the English curriculum. As a result, the participants experienced a total of 19 ER sessions over the year. Each student bought two graded readers to share in class. A class consisted of 12 to 14 students, which resulted in the class's library of 24–28. Although English curriculum coordinators selected the books to be purchased, each student chose and read her preferred book from the class library. The books were Macmillan Readers at Level 2: Beginner (600 headwords) and Penguin Readers at Easystarts and Level 2 (200 and 600 headwords respectively). See Appendix for a list of book titles.

The students read their preferred book(s) at their own pace in a 20-minute ER session. When they finished one book, they returned it to the library and selected a new one. As ER was a part of the students' final course grade, students were required to read to obtain their course credit. The students kept a brief record of their reading in most classes, including book titles and short comments on each book. According to the reading record, the students in the highest English proficiency class achieved the following results: on average 10.67 books ($SD = 2.1$) and 23,219 words ($SD = 5,242$) were read by students of the Department of Child Sciences and 10.42 books ($SD = 2.6$) and 28,940 words ($SD = 10,113$) were read by students of the Department of Psychology. In general, they tended to choose easier books. Approximately half of the students rated one or sometimes two books as relatively difficult or difficult. However, students rated most of the books they read as easy, relatively easy, or appropriate for their level; thus, meaning-focused reading was sustained most of the time. As the books were collected at the end of each ER session, the learners did not read outside the classroom.

Control Group

Instead of ER, the control group ($n = 164$) from the 2009 academic year did a dictogloss for 20 minutes every other week (11 dictogloss tasks in total). A dictogloss is a group dictation task devised by Wajnryb (1990). Learners listen to a short text several times, write down what they hear, and reconstruct the whole text collaboratively with their peers. Typically, students can only retrieve fragments from the text while listening. As such, they are required to get the gist and use their vocabulary and grammatical knowledge to reconstruct the remainder

of the text. The 11 texts used for the dictoglosses were taken from *Interchange Intro* (Richards, 2005), which is the main textbook for the English course. The students participated in the activity in groups of three to four.

The Remaining English Learning Activities

Both groups spent the remaining time receiving the same TBLT class instruction. Each lesson comprised the three principal phases of TBLT: pre-task, main task, and post-task (Ellis, 2003). During the main task phase, the students engaged in speaking activities in pairs and groups. The time difference in the ER and dictogloss treatments was adjusted by the time length of activities in the TBLT session. In addition to the in-class English learning activities, the students in both groups were assigned out-of-class online exercises to reinforce the listening comprehension, vocabulary, and grammatical patterns taught in class.

Preliminary Analyses

The final sample size utilized for the main analysis was 322 (160 and 162 for the ER and control groups, respectively) after data screening (see Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007, pp. 60–116; for detailed explanation on data screening). To ensure the two groups had similar levels of English at the start of the study, a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with four dependent variables (listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar) using SPSS 19.0 (IBM Corp., 2010). The results showed that there were no significant differences between the two groups in all the four sub-categories of English proficiency, Wilks's lambda (Λ) = .992, $F(4, 317) = .604$, $p = .660$.

Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the four sub-categories of English proficiency at the pretest and posttest. Figures 1 to 4 plot changes in the scores for the four sub-categories of English proficiency. To address the research questions, a 2×2 mixed design MANOVA was conducted with SPSS 19.0 (IBM Corp., 2010). The dependent variables were the students' test scores on the four sub-categories of English proficiency. The between-subjects factor was the instruction groups with two levels (the ER and the control groups). The within-subjects factor was the testing time with two levels (pretest and posttest).

The results of MANOVA showed that the main effect for groups ($\Lambda = .978$, $F(4, 317) = 1.766$, $p = .136$)

as well as testing time x group interaction effect ($\wedge = .996, F(4, 317) = .305, p = .875$) were not significant. On the other hand, the main effect for testing time ($\wedge = .654, F(4, 317) = 41.969, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .346$) was significant.

The follow-up univariate analyses of variances (ANOVA) were conducted to clarify in which sub-categories of English proficiency the learners showed improvement. The alpha level of .05 was corrected

with the Holm's sequential Bonferroni procedure to avoid Type I errors. The results showed that the effects of testing time were significant for reading, $F(1, 320) = 130.960, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .290$, and vocabulary, $F(1, 320) = 24.545, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .071$, but not for listening, $F(1, 320) = .346, p = .557$, and grammar, $F(1, 320) = 2.060, p = .152$. It should be noted that although the ANOVA result was significant, the gains achieved between the pretest and posttest were very small for vocabulary (1.66 and 2.05 for the ER and control groups, respectively).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Pretest and Posttest

Factor	ER Group (n = 160)		Control Group (n = 162)	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Reading				
M	40.93	48.84	39.98	47.53
SE	.94	1.01	.98	1.08
95% CI lower bound	39.06	46.86	38.06	45.40
95% CI upper bound	42.79	50.83	41.92	49.66
SD	11.92	12.73	12.44	13.72
Vocabulary				
M	21.41	23.07	20.80	22.85
SE	.57	.57	.60	.54
95% CI lower bound	20.29	21.95	19.61	21.79
95% CI upper bound	22.53	24.19	21.99	23.91
SD	7.17	7.16	7.67	6.83
Listening				
M	49.74	50.14	50.23	50.66
SE	.92	.88	.87	.99
95% CI lower bound	47.93	48.41	48.52	48.71
95% CI upper bound	51.55	51.87	51.94	52.61
SD	11.60	11.08	11.02	12.58
Grammar				
M	21.73	20.84	21.99	21.81
SE	.54	.49	.59	.52
95% CI lower bound	20.66	19.86	20.83	20.78
95% CI upper bound	22.80	21.81	23.15	22.85
SD	6.86	6.24	7.47	6.67

Note. N = 322. Scores in the listening and reading sections range from 0 to 100. Scores in the vocabulary and grammar sections range from 0 to 50.

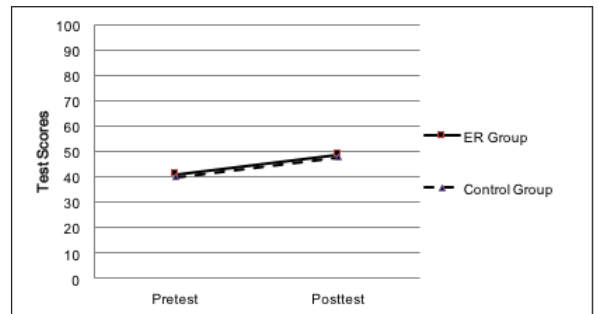


Figure 1. Graphic representation of changes in mean scores for the reading section. Scores range from 0 to 100.

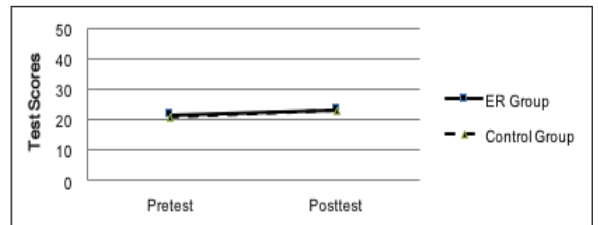


Figure 2. Graphic representation of changes in mean scores for the vocabulary section. Scores range from 0 to 50.

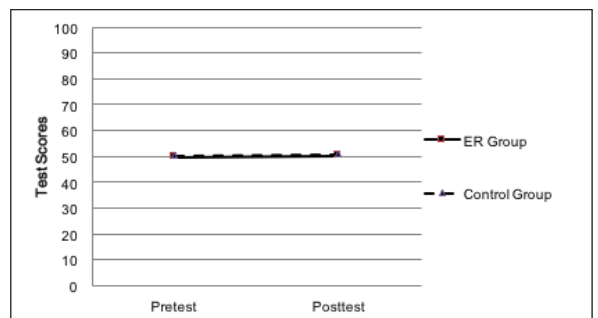


Figure 3. Graphic representation of changes in mean scores for the listening section. Scores range from 0 to 100.

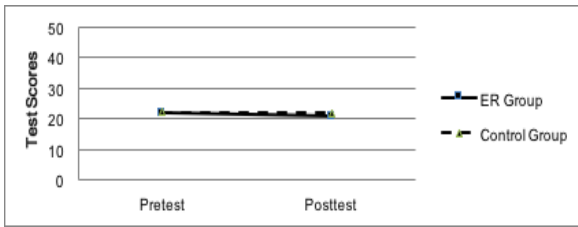


Figure 4. Graphic representation of changes in mean scores for the grammar section. Scores range from 0 to 50.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the effects of ER on improving learners' English proficiency. With respect to the first research question—the extent to which short in-class ER improves English proficiency—the results of the ANOVAs showed that the ER group significantly improved their vocabulary and reading comprehension scores over the year. The findings indicate the possible effectiveness of short in-class ER just as the previous research has demonstrated the efficacy of ER on reading comprehension and vocabulary development (e.g., Bell, 2001; Hayashi, 1999; Lai, 1993; Sheu, 2003; Takase & Otsuki, 2012; Yamashita, 2008). However, it is impossible to attribute the gains to ER without a control group. As the learners did a 20-minute reading activity over the year, they were logically expected to improve reading-related skills merely because they spent the time on the task. In order to clarify the effects of ER, the second research question—whether short in-class ER is more effective than dictogloss in order to improve English proficiency—was set in this study. The results of the ANOVAs revealed that both groups showed similar gains in reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge over an academic year regardless of the instruction type. Therefore, short in-class ER does not yield significantly better results than dictogloss does.

One possible explanation for this is the duration of ER. As out-of-class ER was not assigned to the participants, they were engaged in ER for only 20 minutes every week. Although Day and Bamford (1998) suggest a 15-minute minimum for ER activities, Nishizawa, Yoshioka, and Fukada (2010) reported that 300,000 words is the “threshold for the subjects to feel at ease while reading English texts” (p. 632). Given that, in the present study, students with a higher proficiency level read only approximately 26,000 words on average, it might be necessary to continuously conduct 20-minute ER over a longer period of time to yield significant effects. In other words, different findings may be obtained

if 20-minute ER sessions are conducted over two or more years. Secondly, it might take more time to transfer the skills cultivated through reading graded readers to reading comprehension tasks found in standardized tests. Whereas the participants read graded readers that used simplified English (with 200-600 headwords), the ACE placement tests used more complicated grammar and lower frequency words. Additional reading skills are required in order to improve learners' reading comprehension in a standardized test.

This study has several limitations. The first limitation derives from the use of the intact classes. Although the ER group engaged in 20-minute ER every week over a year, they completed a total of 270 minutes of English instruction per week (i.e., three 90-minute English classes) in addition to online out-of-class assignments. Although the ER group significantly developed their reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge, the English instruction students received in addition to ER is assumed to have affected the results. Furthermore, the control group spent less time on reading activities but showed similar gains in the two domains the ER group improved most on (i.e., reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge). This finding indicates that the gains in the ER group are not solely attributed to ER. The second limitation relates to external validity. The participants of the present study were female first-year Japanese university students and had relatively low English proficiency. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings beyond learners similar to those in this study should be limited.

As the present study used a quasi-experimental research design with intact classes, some variables were not controlled. However, the present study clearly revealed that although short in-class ER might be effective in developing vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension skills, it does not yield significantly better results than other instructional approaches (i.e., dictogloss) when it is used for less than a year.

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Appendix

A List of Book Titles Available to the Students

Publisher	Level	Title	Word Count
Penguin	Easystarts	<i>The Last Photo</i>	800
Penguin	Easystarts	<i>Who Wants to Be a Star?</i>	911
Penguin	Easystarts	<i>The Pearl Girl</i>	949
Penguin	Easystarts	<i>Marcel and the White Star</i>	962
Penguin	Easystarts	<i>Maisie and the Dolphin</i>	973
Penguin	Easystarts	<i>Simon and the Spy</i>	978
Penguin	Easystarts	<i>The Troy Stone</i>	996
Penguin	Easystarts	<i>Marcel and the Mona Lisa</i>	999
Penguin	Level 2	<i>Moonfleet</i>	5,390
Penguin	Level 2	<i>White Fang</i>	7,746
Penguin	Level 2	<i>Kidnapped</i>	9,104
Penguin	Level 2	<i>Black Beauty</i>	9,390
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>Picture Puzzle</i>	1,171
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>Money for a Motorbike</i>	2,200
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>Newspaper Boy</i>	2,240
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>Marco</i>	2,245
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>The Long Tunnel</i>	2,523
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>The House on the Hill</i>	3,053
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>The Mill on the Floss</i>	5,865
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>The Last of the Mohicans</i>	6,514
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>Northanger Abbey</i>	7,337
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>The Man in the Iron Mask</i>	9,055
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>Hawk-eye the Pathfinder</i>	9,237
Macmillan	Level 2-Beginner	<i>The Prisoner of Zenda</i>	9,567

Note. Book selection varies slightly according to class