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The ERJ to succeed: Extensive Reading SIG seminar at Kinki University Language Centre, July 5th 2009

Keywords

extensive reading, JALT ER SIG, ER Seminar, Rob Waring

Extensive Reading (ER) is taking an increasingly central role on the EFL stage in Japan. The JALT ER SIG, officially recognized at last year's conference, is growing rapidly. The first ER Seminar was held last year with 30 attendees seeing four speakers. This year saw 125 people enjoying a plenary by Rob Waring, 11 presentations, 8 poster sessions, and offerings from 10 publishers. ER is not a new idea, but in light of its growing popularity, it is one the academic community is coming to accept and (though not in all cases) embrace.

多読 (ER) は日本の英語教育において次第に中心的な役割を果たしつつある。昨年公式に認められたJALTのER SIGは急速に発展している。第1回のERセミナーは昨年4名の発表者と30名の参加者で行われた。今年はRob Waringの基調講演、11の発表、8つのポスターセッション、出版社10社の教材展示販売を125名の参加者が楽しんだ。ERは新しいアイデアではない。しかし、その人気の拡大は、ERが英語教育界で受け入れられ、全ての授業でではないが、推進されるであろうことを示している。

Co-sponsored by Osaka
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Momoyama Gakuin
Daigaku

The process

The 2009 ERJ Seminar was a success story in cooperation between chapters, SIGs, and other willing professionals within the field. This seminar was a cooperative venture originally started following the 2008 JALT National Conference with just the ER Forming SIG and Osaka Chapter. Daniel Stewart, the ER SIG Coordinator, and I, the Osaka JALT Program Chair at the time, originally envisioned a similar event to last year, with the SIG holding a call for presentations and the Osaka Chapter providing the venue. The Kyoto Chapter quickly joined the organizing process, and Bjorn Fuisting managed the contact with the publishers, a process which turned out to be a key part of this year's event. The call for papers went out in early April, 2009. Publicity was helped by other local JALT chapters in Kansai (many thanks!). Alison Kitzman (Kinki Daigaku Language Center) joined the team to work out the schedule of events. She also organised all the refreshments and built the seminar website that included a preregistration function. Oana Maria Cusen (Kyoto Chapter) also stepped in to help with the treasury side of things.

The event

A variety of presentations and themes were included in the program and are too numerous to list here. Here are the highlights from a sampling of the presentations:

Atsuko Takase (Kinki University) and Akio Furukawa (SEG) looked at starting students off with reading in four different age groups and suggested two tips for success. The first involves *Starting with Simple Stories (SSS)* to motivate students by getting them to read a quantity of easy-to-understand books. Besides the motivation that reading such a quantity brings, this approach also builds up some automaticity in recognizing written words and phrases. In addition, Takase and Furukawa spoke about *Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)*, a technique

that gives busy students time to read in class. The themes informing SSS and SSR were reflected by many other presenters at the seminar.

During the same morning time slot, Alison Kitzman (Kinki Daigaku Language Center) introduced a process for introducing ER into a typical university setting using the Kinki University Reading Can-do List. George Truscott then evaluated the second year of the pilot study at Kinki Daigaku, discussing its issues and successes.

The program at Kinki Daigaku was influenced by another team very active in this field. Tom Robb started working with ER at Kyoto Sangyo University over 20 years ago. Robb was also one of the early adopters and contributors to Moodle, an open source online Course Management System. He has created a Moodle module that assesses students on what they have read. Students can take a quiz every three days on the module to see if they have read and understood a graded reader. By doing so, they collect a series of points which contribute to their overall grade. Quizzes can be crosschecked quickly to see if they are constantly scoring high or low, then modified accordingly.

Complementing Robb's presentation, Mathew Claflin discussed the human (or "messy") side of introducing the ER program at Kyoto Sangyo. The process of accepting ER into the curriculum has taken a long time. All of the stakeholders have had different visions of the program and images of how much work would be involved. Of particular interest was the eventual cooperation given by the library upon realizing that the care of a large set of readers in a compulsory reading program would bring many more people into the library. This shift in perspective encouraged the acceptance of ER at the Kyoto Sangyo campus. Overall, the expansion of the program has been a success but has also set new challenges in terms of keeping teaching teams together and on the same page.

The poster session had a good turnout of presenters and participants, giving a strong networking feel to the day. Interestingly, one area of the poster session was occupied by people trying out the poster session format for the first time, with some worthwhile results. Many of the common and important ER themes were reflected, such as the use of SSS (Thomas Koch) and setting up new programs (Bjorn Fuisting).

The plenary

Rob Waring gave the plenary to a packed house. Whilst one might expect a speaker at an event like this to focus on why ER works, Waring looked at

its different flavours. Most ER approaches have some things in common – the reading is easy, fast, highly comprehensible, and fun. In other respects, approaches may differ, such as whether reading uses class time or not, is assessed or not, and if books are read as a class or by individuals. These variables form the basis for supporting ER within a given institution. Understanding the limits of resources and assessment needs will help tune the program. It may also be possible to adopt a mix of approaches within the same institution. Programs must be adaptable, or they risk being dropped as unworkable.

To help participants promote ER within institutions, Waring looked at several vehicles for its promotion. Firstly he addressed the emotional view, in which ER can be used to help students learn about the human condition and gain good language practice. The logical approach to promoting ER involves its role in complimenting a coursebook. Where coursebooks introduce language elements, they have limitations. Although they may have 30-40,000 words in them, the topical and linear nature of these books leads to little recycling. Teaching collocations, more natural usage, and multiword phrases is all supported by ER.

By far Waring's most powerful argument for ER was the mathematical vehicle for promotion. The sheer number of times a student must meet a single word to internalize that word is huge. Hopefully this time can be shortened by having good quality reading materials, a result backed up by Akio Furukawa's research. Waring noted that Furukawa's data showed "two years of extensive reading gives second grade junior high school students an equivalent reading level of third grade high school students, even taking into account time on task and extra time studying English." This sort of data is most compelling, as people tend to lend more credence to statistical results than anecdotal evidence.

From those who feel graded readers are too easy to those who feel they have no time for ER, Waring concisely and efficiently addressed a variety of concerns. He recommended starting small, foreseeing problems, and setting aims for both students and the program. In closing, he gave tasks to all those present: Write a graded reading book, be a guru, write an article (particularly for the ER SIG newsletter - ERJ), or do some action research.

Conclusion

If I were to point to any single factor that made this event a success, it is the willingness of volunteers who just pitched in and helped generate a widespread buzz of publicity. This included all those in-

volved in the event leading up to the day, including presenters, and those who arrived and said, "Can I do anything?" The willingness of members to join in and take positive action is one of the things that makes JALT special, and plenty of that rubbed off on the day itself. I also believe it is this same willingness of teachers to pitch in and get started that will ultimately make ER a success in the classroom. With proponents such as those who attended this seminar, the result is sure to be a piece of magic.

Next year's ERJ Seminar will be in Hokkaido. Visit <www.jaltersig.org> for details as soon as they are available!

Participating publishers

Abax, Compass, McGraw-Hill, Oxford, Pearson/Longman, Cambridge ESOL, Cengage, Macmillan,

RIC Publications, and Scholastic Inc. with Mary Glasgow Magazine

More information

- Conference website and pictures <sites.google.com/site/jalt2009conference/eventpix>.
- Rob Waring's Keynote Address slides can be downloaded at <www.robwaring.org/presentations>.
- Moodle Reading Module: <moodle.org/mod/data/view.php?id=13&rid=2131>.

Myles Grogan is a lecturer at Momoyama Gakuin Daigaku. Besides extensive reading, his research interests focus on strategies for introducing and applying technologies for use by students and teachers. He continues to serve Osaka JALT as an officer at large.

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...with Mark de Boer & Dax Thomas

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We welcome submissions for the My Share column. Submissions should be up to 700 words describing a successful technique or lesson plan you have used which can be replicated by readers, and should conform to the My Share format (see any edition of *The Language Teacher*). Please send submissions to <my-share@jalt-publications.org>.



MY SHARE ONLINE

A linked index of My Share articles can be found at:

<jalt-publications.org/tlt/myshare/>

WELCOME to this month's My Share! This month Annie Menard brings us a great icebreaker activity bound to get students talking and BK Cottle has a great psychology test that will have students finding out interesting information about their classmates!

A great icebreaker

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Quick guide

Key words: Methodology, speaking, icebreaker

Learner English level: Beginning and above

Learner maturity level: Any level as long as they can make a sentence (e.g., junior high school and above)

Preparation time: 5 minutes

Activity time: From 10 minutes to an hour

Materials: 6 pieces of scrap paper (blank on one side, per student) 1 timer

Introduction

This is an icebreaker that will truly get students talking and listening, not just reading questions off a piece of paper. It's quite simple and versatile in style as well as in length.