

Exploring Extensive Listening With Graded-Reader CDs

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In this paper we present the results of a yearlong study on using Graded Readers with CDs for listening and students' attitudes toward English in general in required English classes at a large university in Japan. The main purposes of the study were to examine how much students' listening skills changed over the course of a year and to explore the impact of Graded Reader-related activities on students' attitudes toward English. The study employed pre-, midyear-, and posttests in listening, in addition to surveys. To obtain further insights, selected students participated in interviews at the end of the year. The findings suggest that the activities with Graded Readers and CDs (e.g., listening, interaction through pair and group work, and shadowing) have a potential to help develop students' English abilities. This is because through the activities, they became more aware of their strengths and weaknesses in English than they were before.

本研究は、CDを使用したグレイデッド・リーダーズ（段階別読本）が大規模大学で英語必修科目を1年間にわたり履修した学生のリスニングや英語全般に対する認識に、どのような影響をもたらすかを論じる。研究の主な目的は、学生のリスニングが1年間の授業を通してどのように変わっていったか、またグレイデッド・リーダーズに関する活動が学生の英語に関する態度にどのような影響をもたらすか、調べることであった。リスニングにおいては事前、中間、事後のテストを行い、その後アンケート調査をした。さらに研究結果の理解を深めるため、選択した数人の学生にインタビューを行った。結果、グレイデッド・リーダーズとCD使用の活動（リスニング、ペア/グループワーク、シャドーイング等）は学生の英語能力を高める可能性があることが示唆された。なぜならば、この活動を通して、学生自身が自分の英語の向上点や弱点についてさらに認識を深めることができたからである。

WE HAVE been interested in extensive listening with Graded Readers (GRs) because there is not much research in this area, though there are many studies on extensive reading and GRs for EFL learners. Extensive reading with GRs, based on Krashen's theory, is promising for improving English learners' reading skills (Krashen, 2004; Day & Bamford, 1998). Could extensive listening with Graded Readers with CDs (GR-CDs) also help improve their listening in the same way? This was the theme of this research project.

The project started with required English classes in a large Japanese university in 2007, since which several research designs of the project using GR-CDs have been examined. Every academic year, the project employed a new design slightly different from that of the previous year in order to find the best way to measure students' listening improvement with GR-CDs. In



2010 and 2011, the project used the same instruments, but under slightly different conditions.

This study, based on the 2011 data, discusses the results of a yearlong study on using GR-CDs for listening and on university students' attitudes toward English. The main purposes of the study were to examine how much students' listening skills changed over the course of a year and also to explore the impact of GR-related activities on students' attitudes towards English in general. The study employed pre-, midyear-, and posttests in listening, in addition to surveys. At the end of the year, selected students participated in interviews.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following questions regarding the effectiveness of GR-CDs:

1. Does using GR-CDs improve students' listening ability?
2. How do students feel about GR-CDs?
3. What do students feel about their abilities in English?
4. To what do students attribute their improvements in English?
5. What are the impacts of GR-related activities on students' attitudes toward English in general?
6. What have students realized about their strengths in English?
7. What have students realized about their weaknesses in English?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were a group of more advanced students from a large Japanese university. More advanced students were cho-

sen as they were thought to be more motivated to study English. Teachers of four classes were included in the research project, and all their students participated in the study. Students were in their 1st year of university beginning in April 2011 and were enrolled in required English courses.

Context

Three of the four student groups each had around 30 students who met twice a week, 30 weeks in the year, for a total of 60 times. The fourth group consisted of 18 high-intermediate students who met four times a week, for a total of 120 times a year. Each class was 90 minutes long. Three of the groups were taught by Japanese teachers for one semester and English native-speaking teachers for the other semester in the year. The last group met an English native teacher as well as a Japanese teacher four times a week. For all four groups, teachers whose native language was Japanese taught the classes mainly in English because the project researchers knew the merits of such a linguistic setting from experience and from surveys in 2009 and 2010 (Ware, Yonezawa, Kurihara, & Durand, 2012). Many students appreciated the English-only classes.

The project started with the rule of using 20 minutes each class for listening and shadowing with GR-CDs. However, the enforcement of the rule varied according to the instructor and the semester. The main reason for this was the time needed for covering class materials required by the university's English curriculum. Most of the teachers in the project could not give regular time for listening and shadowing in class: sometimes 20 minutes or sometimes none at all. However, students could always access GR-CDs both in and out of class. Since bringing GR-CDs into the classroom is very important in terms of accessibility, all classrooms in the project were provided with a mobile library of GR-CDs with instructions on how to read, listen, and shadow. Students were instructed to choose GR-CDs that they

thought would be easy to read. They borrowed GR-CDs and finished (or were supposed to finish) reading at home, or when time permitted, in class. Students listened to GR-CDs and practiced shadowing with them. Students were also encouraged to read, listen, and shadow outside of class.

The way in which students choose GR-CDs was based on ideas of extensive reading with GRs, which have been employed by many GR researchers, including Sakai (2005), Furukawa (2010), and Takase (2010). That is, students were instructed to choose books for reading and listening that they could easily understand without using a dictionary. Students were told that following this rule is key to enjoying the GRs.

Listening Tests

Participants were tested in May 2011, near the start of their first semester at the university. The test was a listening examination with multiple-choice questions made by the research project members. The recordings on the tests consisted of several different genres, including conversations, speeches, and narration. The same test was given again at the end of the students' first semester in July 2011 and then finally near the end of their second semester in December 2011. In May 2011, 104 students completed the listening exam, and 102 completed the exam in July 2011. In December 2011, only 93 students completed the listening exam. Overall, 88 students completed all three tests.

Surveys

Around the same time as the tests, students completed surveys two times, in July and December, regarding their views of GR-CDs and of learning English in general. The survey included both closed and open-ended research questions. The survey questions included the above research questions (1 through 7). Some of the students, however, did not turn in the surveys.

Complete data exists for 69 students. The missing data can be considered missing at random. In general, any available student data is included when possible.

Interviews

Out of all the students in the project, eight were selected for qualitative interviews. These students were selected among the survey respondents because they were willing to participate in the interviews. It was believed that these eight would most likely be rich sources of information. The candidates were all from Japanese teachers' classes because interviews were to be conducted in Japanese. Each student was interviewed once after the 2nd semester, in either January or February 2012. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour each. The interviewers focused on four question categories: participants' English educational background before entering university, their gains from GR-CDs activities, their perceived weaknesses in the activities, and the next steps they would like to take for improving their English. All interview participants, named S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, and Z, started to learn English from Japanese teachers of English and native English speakers when they were elementary school students, though on a limited and irregular basis. According to the participants, the classes they took in their junior and senior high schools were grammar and reading focused, but included speaking and listening activities. Among the participants, four students had special English learning experiences in high school. For example, student T had participated in a homestay program in Canada for 1 month; student X had participated in a homestay program in Australia for 2 weeks; and student Z had participated in an English program for almost 2 months in Hawaii and was at the time planning to study English for another 8 months starting in the summer of 2012. Furthermore, student W had gone to school in England for almost 4 years, from mid-6th grade to mid-9th grade, and then transferred to a Japanese girls'

combined junior-senior high school. The other four students had not been abroad or had special experiences of studying English abroad.

Survey and Interview Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study involved both deductive and inductive reasoning processes. In the former processes, counts of each category from closed-ended questions were obtained for survey questions. In the latter, inductive processes, we searched for patterns, categories, and themes that emerged in the interview data. To strengthen the trustworthiness (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the qualitative data analysis, two researchers collaboratively coded the data, first individually analyzing the interview data and then comparing (adding to and modifying) the results.

Findings

Quantitative Results

Overall, there was little correlation between listening score improvement and GR-CDs. Spearman's rank correlations, also called Spearman's rho, between listening score gains (the scores for the December test minus the scores for the July test) and the number of books completed, the number of books started but not completed, and the number of minutes spent reading are all very close to zero and not statistically significant. (Spearman's rho was used since none of the variables measuring amount of reading are normally distributed.) The only significant correlation, albeit quite modest at .227, is with other books read ($p = .038$). This figure indicates that the students who read in English on their own more had a slight tendency to improve more than others in listening. Results for the yearlong period (May to December), based on 69 students, also show nonsignificant correlations close to zero.

Results of Surveys

Even though these correlations are not significant, students still perceived benefit from the GR-CDs. In particular, responding to the open-ended question, *What have you realized about your strengths in English*, more than one in five students felt that their listening skills improved, as shown in Figure 1. Students reported improvement in many other areas as well, including reading speed and skill. In general, students also felt more interested in listening to English. In response to a related question, approximately 63% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they had become more interested in listening to English since the beginning of the school year (data not shown).

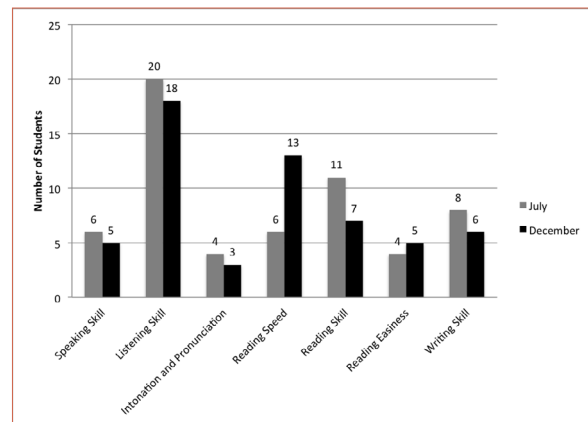


Figure 1. Student Perceived Areas of Improvement Through GR-CDs. In July, $n = 83$. In December, $n = 93$. Multiple answers (or no answer) were allowed.

Students were somewhat ambivalent about their general improvements in English. Figure 2 shows the results of the closed-ended question, *Have your general English abilities improved since April 2011?* In December 2011, 42% of students felt that their English had improved, but 37% said that it had remained the same, and 21% felt that it had actually decreased. Figure 3 shows the main reasons for improvement among students who felt they had improved. This includes 35 students in July and 38 students in December. To the multiple choice question, *Which activities do you think have helped improve your English abilities,* in July 2011, 38% of students who felt they had improved reported that reading, listening, or shadowing with GR-CDs helped improve their English. Writing was another reason for improvement in English. In December 2011, though, among the students who felt their English had improved, the number of students who felt that activities with GRs were the main reason for their improvement decreased slightly to 28%. Other unspecified class activities were seen as the main reason for improvement at this time.

Through the class activities and GR-CDs, students also gained an understanding of their weak points in English, as shown in Figure 4. The open-ended question asked was, *What have you realized about your weaknesses in English?* Vocabulary was most keenly and consistently felt to be a weakness, with 19 students reporting this in July and 17 reporting this in December. Speaking skills and problems with intonation, pronunciation, and stress are another area of concern, with 25 and 19 students showing concern with these in July and December, respectively. The GR-CDs may have made students more aware of issues related to speaking.

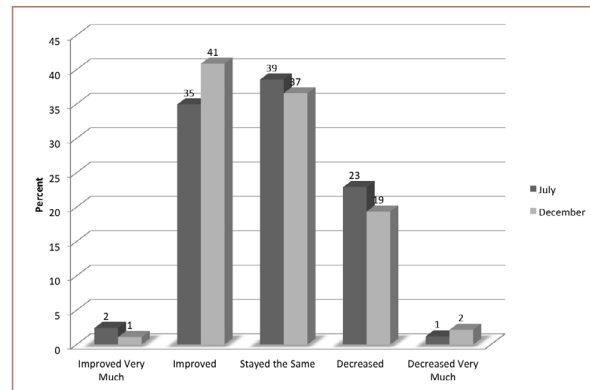


Figure 2. Student Feelings of Improvement in General English Ability (Percent). In July, $n = 83$. In December, $n = 91$.

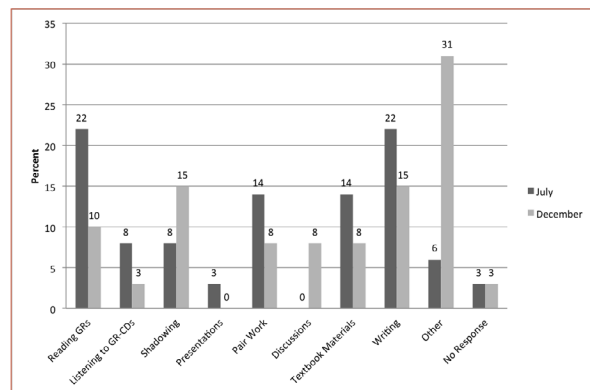


Figure 3. Student Perceived Main Reason for Improved English. In July, $n = 35$. In December, $n = 38$. Due to rounding error, December data total to 101%.

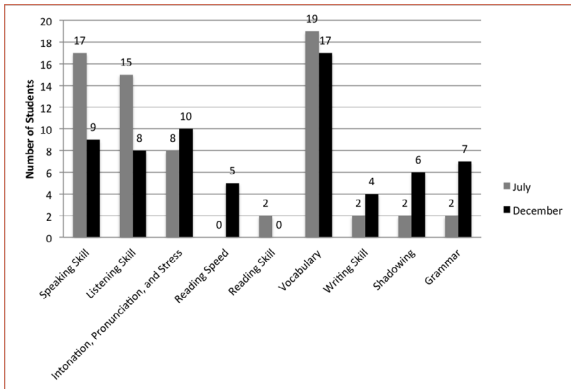


Figure 4. Student Perceived Areas of Weakness. In July, $n = 83$. In December, $n = 93$. Multiple answers (or no answer) were allowed.

Using GR-CDs had little effect on student listening test scores. It is likely, however, that most students were not reading or listening extensively enough. Out of 93 students, 75 reported reading 9 or fewer books in the second semester. They also may not have studied English enough in general. In December, out of 51 students, 21 said that they did not study English very much. Students felt, though, that the GR-CDs especially improved their listening skills and helped them understand weaknesses in English that they may not have thought of before. Results from the qualitative analysis provide richer insight to students' use of the GR-CDs.

Qualitative Results From Interviews

Students' Perceptions of Their English Strengths

The results from the open-ended survey questions (research questions 5, 6, and 7) considerably overlap those from the

interviews. The findings suggest strong credibility in themselves, which is “the match between the constructed realities of respondents and those realities as represented by the evaluator” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 237). Just as survey respondents perceived benefits from the activities of GR-CDs, the eight interview participants also considered that the GR-related activities—reading, listening, and shadowing—helped develop positive attitudes toward their English abilities, especially in terms of realizing differences between the English spoken by native speakers and by the students themselves and in improving silent reading skills.

Regarding differences between the English spoken by native speakers and by students, three students (S, T, and U) noticed a gap between the English pronunciation and intonation of native speakers and those of students. For example, student U commented, “While listening to GR-CDs, I came to understand the intonation of English. While listening, I was getting used to how to speak in English with proper intonation.” (The students' quotes throughout this paper were translated into English from Japanese by the researchers.)

In addition, four students (S, T, W, and Z) mentioned that the activities with GRs helped improve their reading skills, especially their speed of silent reading. For example, student T mentioned:

[After using GRs], my reading speed has increased a little . . . I used to translate each word and sentence. But even if there is something I cannot translate, I try to understand the general meaning of the story. In my class in the fall semester, we checked our reading speed and I could read about 100 words per minute. After a while, I did it myself. Now it is about 150.

Student W further commented how her reading speed increased with GRs:

It was not like reading with a flow but reading each sentence clause-by-clause, and the reading speed was slow . . . I tended to look at every word like “in” and “a” when I was not accustomed to fast reading. But the more I read . . . the more I came to look at important words. . . . I’ve started to read like I talk. [I had that kind of feeling] when I finished with the 20th book.

Student W further commented on silent reading, that reading less difficult books helped develop the skills of guessing the meaning from the context written in the text. She mentioned:

You read lots of easy books, and you will barely miss what an author wants to say in an easy text. You know, the flow of a story . . . You will understand the cohesion of the story and you can guess the author’s main idea . . . You can improve your skill of understanding the text.

Moreover, student W mentioned that reading less difficult books like GRs also helped her realize the role of conjunctions used not only in reading but also in writing, and it would eventually help her read more difficult books. Student W commented:

[When you read easy books like GRs,] you will realize the important role of conjunctions . . . You will also realize their importance even when you read a difficult book [because it works in the same way]. You understand the author brings in a conjunction like “but” or “however” if he wants to contradict his argument . . . My teacher says the same thing in my writing class, and I understand it like, “Oh yes, I know it.”

Students’ Perceptions of Their English Weaknesses

Vocabulary, phonology, and listening and shadowing skills are the main weaknesses that the students noticed, according to the written comments in the surveys. The interview participants also referred to the same weaknesses. Student Y referred to his lack of comprehension of vocabulary: “I don’t have enough vocabulary. I just have a feeling of understanding a word, but I actually don’t comprehend the full meaning of the word.” In other words, student Y became aware that he comprehended words superficially, which meant that he had not reached a good enough level to fully use some words.

A second weakness that interviewees noticed was phonological differences between their native language and their target language, English. Two of the interviewees noticed their inability to comprehend connected speech patterns, such as word assimilation, reduction, and elision. Student S said, “I couldn’t comprehend linking words,” and student T said:

While I shadow, I’ve noticed that it is hard to connect the words of English. I could not say “What’s your~?” for example. I realized that English sounds are different when words are connected, but I could not make the sound.

Finally, two interview participants noticed their difficulties in following what they read when they were more concerned about shadowing phonologically. They said that they could not comprehend the meaning of the story they read aloud while they were involved in shadowing. As student T said, “I can understand better when I listen rather than shadow When I shadow, I focus on both listening and speaking. I ended up trying to precisely follow English and speak without getting the meaning of the story.” He contended that it was hard to do two things at the same time.

This project using GR-CDs has shown that the activities give learners opportunities to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses in English.

Input and Interaction Through Pair and Group Work

Extensive reading and listening are likely to be beneficial ways to improve English. Some advanced students achieved a high TOEIC score after GR-CD activities. Student W achieved a score of more than 600 at the end of the 2011 fall semester, after reading 40 GRs. She kept independently reading GRs until the end of the spring semester 2012 and reached a score of 800 after finishing another 40 GRs. Student W attributed the increase in scores to GR-CDs. This is not the only successful case in the years of our project; however, not many students turn into automatically successful independent learners with GR-CDs.

Bringing a library of GR-CDs to class and encouraging students to read and listen to many books does not mean that students necessarily improve such skills. How then can students be hooked into reading and listening with GR-CDs and transformed into successful learners?

In 2009 and 2010, our research showed students' strong interest in interacting with their classmates in reading and shadowing activities. For example, open-ended questions from the 2009 surveys indicated that fun, interesting, and helpful activities included pair-work, group work, and discussions, with or without GR-CDs and shadowing (Ware, Yonezawa, Kurihara, & Durand, 2012). Furthermore, an interview participant in 2010 talked about the merits of pair-work with shadowing, saying:

Doing shadowing with GRs in pairs is better . . . You'll be more careful not to give a difficult time to your partner . . . You'll make a commitment to shadowing if you shadow with your partner.

It was found that activities with pair and group work could boost student motivation for learning English or contribute to finding their problems in learning English. Thus, in the 2011 project, a lot of pair-work in class was conducted in all study classes, and a group presentation was used in one of the classes.

The group presentation used the following procedure. Each group of three or four students got together and chose their favorite GR, discussed it, and finally made a 5-minute PowerPoint presentation on it. Following Furr's (2007) role samples for GRs, every member of the group had a clear, differentiated role that their teacher had assigned at the start. For example, different students had the roles of summarizing a GR story, comparing similarities and differences between the story's culture and their own, or discovering the connection between the story and their own lives. Three out of four interviewees who participated in the presentation project responded positively. Student S said, "I found reading a GR in a group interesting. I read the same book with my classmate, student A, but we discovered different cultural perspectives in the book, which I thought was interesting."

Student X, who was usually good at listening and speaking, became aware of his poor presentation skills. He said:

When I made a presentation about a GR with my classmates using PowerPoint, I noticed my poor persuasive skill. I read from a prepared text in a monotone voice. My pronunciation was bad. My message was not so smooth. I couldn't say much in my own presentation . . . but the presentation was beneficial.

After the project, student X started to study grammar, which he found was his weakness. The merits of working with others were also mentioned, as when student U said:

It was hard to read the book we chose because it was a strange story, but I had a feeling of achievement when I

finished reading it. It took weeks to understand the whole story. I had some part of the book that I didn't understand and I asked my partner about it.

Pair-work and group work using GRs have the potential to elevate student motivation, and at the same time, to make them aware of what they need to do next to learn English.

Conclusions

The results of the three listening tests did not statistically show any positive impacts on students' listening skills from GR-CDs. However, we found from students' written comments and interviews that they thought that the activities with the GR-CDs were beneficial. The activities have the potential to help improve students' English because students become aware of their strengths in English in such areas as listening, phonology (pronunciation, intonation, stress, etc.), and reading speed.

On the other hand, the use of GR-CDs also helped the students notice the weak points of their English through listening to English at natural speed. Students became aware of their lack of vocabulary and their difficulty with phonology (connected speech patterns in addition to pronunciation, intonation, and stress) and their problems in understanding when shadowing. This last problem should not be ignored. Unless students comprehend the text they are shadowing, their improvement in English and their feeling of achievement will be limited.

Another important finding is that students benefit from pair and group work related to the GR-CDs. The important role of interaction in language acquisition has been shown in this study. This conclusion is in line with Schmidt (1995): "While input and interaction are important to establish a secure level of communicative proficiency, this is not because language learning is unconscious, but because input and interaction, attention, and awareness are all crucial for learning" (p. 3).

In conclusion, though this study found that the activities with GR-CDs did not affect students' listening scores much, our qualitative data suggest that using such activities (e.g., listening, shadowing, and interactions through pair and group work) has the potential to improve students' English.

Bio Data

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