Extensive Reading Start-up in Junior and Senior High School

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Extensive reading (ER) is a well-known and popular activity employed by L2 educators, but relatively little information related to secondary school ER programs has been published to date. This paper traces the work of a novice ER practitioner, from the discovery of ER through to the design and implementation of a program in a combined junior and senior private high school. Contrary to recommendations in much of the core literature in ER, this program makes use of both authentic and graded texts that were already on hand in an existing library collection by integrating grading scales from the Extensive Reading Foundation and the Start with Simple Stories (SSS) *yomiyasusa* reading levels. Under the tenets of this program, special consideration is given to the needs of young learners at the very beginning of their L2 reading skills development.

多読（ER）は第二言語教育者によって用いられる、一般によく知られた方法である。しかしながら、相対的に見ても高等学校における多読プログラムに関する情報はほとんど発表されていない。本論文では、多読にはほぼ初心者である教師が多読と出会い、そのプログラムを構成して実行するまでの経緯を追っている。多読研究の学術文献で提唱されている難易度別に分類された洋書のみを利用するだけではなく、この学校における多読プログラムでは併設図書館に既存する『ネイティブスピーカー向けの洋書』と、国際多読教育学会とSSS英語多読研究会の読みやすさレベル（YL）によって難易度別に分けられた洋書の両方を利用している。また、このプログラムは第二言語で読解するには初歩レベルにいる若い学習者のために特別に構成されている。

EXTENSIVE READING (ER) has emerged in the EFL education context as a very popular activity for providing L2 learners with massive input of, and exposure to, the target language (Waring, 2011). Educators and researchers in Japan—both Japanese and native speakers of English—have been on the cutting edge of the ER movement since its emergence in the 1990s. Although a limited amount of research and practice has been focused on young learners, the majority of ER efforts have dealt mainly with L2 learners at the tertiary level. For a comprehensive list of research on ER, see the annotated bibliography published by the Extensive Reading Foundation (n.d.), which clearly indicates the lack of research focused on young learners (http://erfoundation.org/ERF_Guide.pdf). This paper describes one ER program developed for use at the junior and senior secondary level, with particular emphasis on the unique challenges educators face when attempting to introduce ER to young learners aged 12 to 18. It traces the origins and development of the author's understanding of ER, the relationship to and use of an existing library resource of nearly 2,000 English titles, and the growth of the program through the adoption by colleagues with

pupils in one private, 6-year school for girls. The paper concludes with a description of the current state of this program, as well as a brief discussion of the future prospects and direction.

Genesis of an Idea

Like many foreign language teachers in Japan, I arrived here with no teaching experience and although I was a native speaker, I admittedly had a very limited understanding of language learning. After a 2-year trial-by-fire introduction to teaching at an *eikaiwa*, I was fortunate to find a position at a private junior and senior high school for girls. Unbeknownst to me, the position was, in fact, a very rare opportunity to perform the duties of a teacher with a great deal of autonomy and responsibility for syllabus design, textbook selection, independent classroom management, and the development of extracurricular programming. After taking most of the first year to become familiar with the students, school, and expectations, this opportunity to act as a "real" teacher provided me the impetus to seek out further professional development opportunities.

My first exposure to teacher development came in my 2nd year as a full-time teacher. An Oxford University Press (OUP) workshop offering a series of presentations over a weekend was held in my home city of Sendai. One of the presenters introduced a concept that was hitherto unknown to me, *extensive reading*. The presenter, Ben Shearon, reviewed Krashen's input hypothesis concept of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1977) and coupled it with Paul Nation's (1997) concept of the need to meet new vocabulary in excess of a dozen times as necessary for language acquisition to take place. These were contrasted with the very limited exposure to English Japanese learners typically experience over their 6 years of secondary education.

It was around the same time that I discovered our school library. More specifically, I discovered the treasure trove of English books that totaled nearly 2,000 titles. I was excited to find such a vast resource, but was disappointed in the lack of organization of the section. The collection contained hundreds of literary masterpieces in their original form, about 1,000 graded readers, and nearly 500 titles written for native English-speaking children, all mixed together. I asked the librarians if I could reorganize the collection, and they enthusiastically accepted my offer.

The first attempt to organize the section aimed simply to sort out the different book types and arrange them in some sort of order. As I worked my way through the different series and different publishers, a number of things raised concerns. First was the lack of consistency in the coding between the levels of difficulty assigned to graded readers by different publishers. Many publishers divided their levels based on the notion of *headword*—which is similar to a main dictionary entry, under which the many variants (conjugations and parts of speech) of the word are listed, for example *help* which would then include the variations, inter alia, *helps, helping, helped, helpful,* and *helpless.* Second was the overwhelming number of books that were in as-new condition, having been read little if ever. I also discovered that the collection was comprised mainly of books far above the reading level of the vast majority of the students at our school. The final observation I made was as a result of spending time on the library floor where the books were located. Students had been assigned winter vacation English homework, and as part of it they were required to read one English book. Invariably, students sought out the easiest books available and accomplished their assignments in a matter of minutes, often whilst standing in front of the section.

I first mentioned my concerns to the school administration, and they offered to support my interest in improving the English book section with funding. However, with so many unread books in the library already, I didn't see this as a viable solution. It took some additional time and research before I started to understand that the best way forward would be to develop some sort of ER program.

Program Development

The first publication I read came from OUP entitled *The 'Why' and 'How' of Using Graded Readers* (Waring, n.d. a). This book was very helpful in understanding what others had done with ER programs. In addition, the ER Foundation (ERF) had a number of useful resources posted on their website (http://erfoundation.org/wordpress/), most importantly the ERF Grading Scale (Figure 1) to divide graded readers from beginner to advanced in five general levels, which were further subdivided into early, mid, and high. Although these were helpful, when I considered the needs of our school's learners in particular, I realized that more precise levels would be required at the beginner stages to help very low level readers get started with ER. As an example, the popular *Oxford Reading Tree* children's series, which is appropriate for early reading development particularly at the junior high school level, contains 15 distinct levels—what OUP calls stages—but nearly the entire collection would fall under the ERF beginner category. Rather than the five general ERF levels, I decided on a total of 12 levels for our school's reader scale, dividing the first three ERF levels into 10 (Figure 2), mirroring the ERF level subdivisions. With this scale in hand, I set about assigning levels to the books in the library.

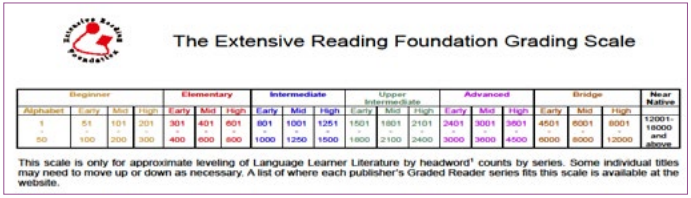

Figure 1. The ERF grading scale. Note that the figure shown has been revised by ERF to now include two additional upper levels, Bridge and Near-Native, which did not appear on the scale that I used in 2010.

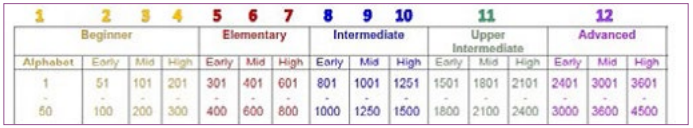

Figure 2. The ERF grading scale with the 12 numerical reading levels added at the top.

The task was rather straightforward at first, with many of the series and levels appearing in the ERF publishers' guide (Waring, n.d. b). This early success was soon met with a number of setbacks. Most significantly, many of the graded readers we had on hand were out of print, and no headword or reading level was available. Second, a large number of the books on hand were intended for native speakers. Bamford's claim that "for all but advanced learners, the best way to promote extensive reading is by means of graded readers" (1984, p. 218) is a widely accepted and generally followed approach in typical ER programs. However, I wished to make use of the large number of these so-called authentic texts my school had accumulated. It was my belief that to do so was important, not only to effectively recycle existing resources, but also to offer the opportunity to our students to access a body of literature so very familiar to many native speakers of English—series such as *Curious George, Magic Tree House, The Frog and the Toad,* and *Peter Rabbit.* Therefore, I set out to learn more about the use of authentic texts in an ER program.

The majority of what I discovered related to ER in English was written by native speakers of English and echoed much of what the ERF literature contained. As I continued to search for alternative perspectives, some Japan context-specific literature dealing particularly with young learners became evident. A highly successful program called *Start with Simple Stories* (SSS) and its related *yomiyasusa* level (YL) for ease of reading was outlined in an informative paper by its originator and cram-school owner Aiko Furukawa (2006). In addition to the short paper, SSS is described in detail along with an extensive book guide, now in its fourth edition (Furukawa et al.,

2013). In this guide, English books—graded readers, and authentic texts alike—are individually rated on a readability scale by Japanese learners of English themselves, thereby providing highly informative insight into the reading level of unsimplified English literature books and stories.

With this additional information provided by the YL scale, I revisited the original 12-level grading system I had devised and created a hybrid scale making use of both the ERF and YL scales (Figure 3). The Flesch-Kincaid grade-level readability scores (see http://www.readabilityformulas.com/flesch-grade-level-readability-formula.php) are based on a formula developed in the 1940s (Flesch, 1979). The convenience of the formula's widespread adoption by bookseller Amazon and its incorporation into Microsoft Word helped me to address the out-of-print and obscure titles and allowed me to grade nearly all of the 2000 or so English books in our library. However, assigning reading levels to the books alone was not going to provide a foundation for an ER program. A second, but not final stage in the development of this program would have to address reading targets and volume. Many of the university programs I became familiar with dealt with reading volume targets in terms of total page counts from the books. However, because I was dealing with young learners and many of the books in my collection contained abundant illustrations, simple page-counts would not sufficiently measure actual reading volume.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11			12		
Beginner				Elementary			Intermediate			Upper Intermediate			Advanced		
Alphabet	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High
1	51	101	201	301	401	601	801	1001	1251	1501	1801	2101	2401	3001	3601
~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~
50	100	200	300	400	600	800	1000	1250	1500	1800	2100	2400	3000	3600	4500
YL 0.3	0.5	0.7	0.9	1.1	1.4	1.8	2.2	3.0	3.7	6.0			6.1+		
FK -2	-1.5	-0.5	0	1	1.5	2.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	8.0			8.1+		

Figure 3. The 12 reading levels with *yomiyasusa* and Flesch-Kincaid scales added.

While attending an ER workshop by Ken Schmidt, one of the ERF board members, I learned of a convenient way for learners and teachers to manage reading volume concerns. Ken had devised a point system for all of the books in his ER program at a rate of one point for every 200 words in a book. When considering the level of students at my school, and the very low proficiency level they would begin reading at, I decided to modify Ken's system and assign one point for every 100 words contained in a text, divided into half-points for books up to 1000 words in length (meaning a text of 250 words is assigned 2.5 points). Each English book in our collection now has a colour-coded tape on the spine and cover indicating which of the twelve levels it belongs to as well as a vibrant yellow and black sticker on the front cover indicating how many points (and therefore words) the book contains (see Figure 4 for examples).

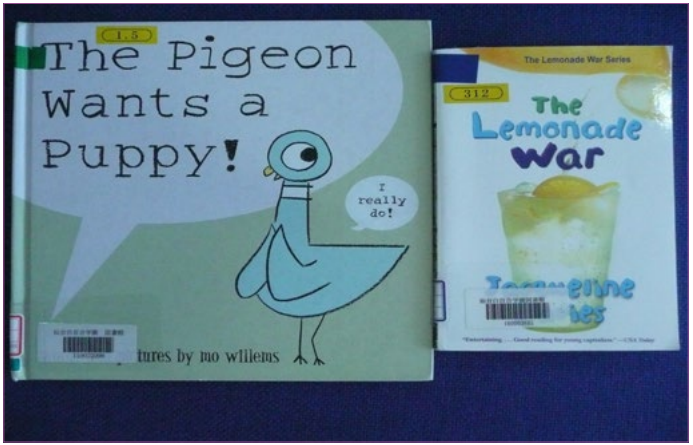

Figure 4. Two books with level tape in upper left corner and yellow point label.

I created two laminated posters which displayed the twelve levels—along with approximate equivalencies to popular English proficiency tests TOEIC, TOEFL, and STEP-Eiken which I compiled using a combination of my own intuition and, more importantly, a reference chart from the ER Foundation (Waring, n.d. c)—for the students to use as level guides. These were posted at both ends of the English section in the library (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Laminated poster indicates reading levels and common test equivalencies.

In total, I spent hundreds of hours over an entire year preparing the English books for use, but I was convinced that my efforts would serve the students and school in some way in the future, so I devoted as much time and energy to the project as I possibly could. I was able to elicit the assistance of a few students to affix the coloured tape to indicate the reading levels, and one colleague invested a few hours researching book levels, but I carried out the vast majority of the work myself. As I neared the end of the book leveling, our two librarians took over the task of preparing the last books with coloured tape and point labels—a task that they have continued as new books are added to our collection.

ER Program Launch

Phase One

Now that the books were organized, the next step was to develop a program for the students to make use of the leveling and point system I had in place. Initially, I had hoped to establish a school-wide "silent sustained reading" (SSR) period in the school's daily time schedule along the lines of Seow (1999), as a precursor to a more comprehensive ER program. When I suggested this to the administration, they reacted positively but suggested that, rather than being a single-teacher initiative, something of this nature would be better suited as an English Department derived program. After subsequent discussions in Department meetings, it became apparent that, despite support from the Department head and school administration, there was great resistance from some of my colleagues to make use of the resource I had organized.

Rather than spending time and energy trying to convince others of the value of an ER program, I decided to start an ER program within my own classes with my own students. In addition, one of my colleagues asked to participate on a limited basis. Together, we taught nearly 250 of the school's approximately 900 students. We made use of approximately 10% of class time for SSR. It was our belief that allocating dedicated reading time in class would help even the most reluctant readers to develop better reading habits and be able to record at least minimal reading achievement, as well as provide teacher-modeling as active readers as well. The target of 10% of class time was somewhat arbitrary, but we felt it was important to strike a balance with the traditional lesson expectations both of students and colleagues, as well as the requirements to cover enough textbook material to compose a paper test. I believe that dedicating more class time to reading-related activities would be beneficial, but given the very limited contact time with our students and the requirement of a written examination, there is little opportunity to expand on this within class time. For students to fully satisfy the volume requirements, out-of-class reading time ranging from 50 to

110 minutes per week would be required, assuming reading speeds of 100 to 150 words per minute and a 30-week academic calendar. We set weekly, semester, and yearly reading goals based on the points system I devised and students recorded their reading activity in personalized class reading diaries (see Figure 6 for samples of a completed diary), kept at the circulation desk in the library. The goals were again arbitrary, but based on conversations with other ER practitioners I understood it was important to set goals or expectations in order to motivate or persuade students to actively participate. Goals ranged from our youngest students, in junior high school 2nd year, who were asked to read 15,000 words (150 points) per semester, to our English intensive 1st-year high school students, who were asked to read 50,000 words each semester. Students who reached or exceeded the goal were given full marks for this component of their assessment, which ranged from 10% to 20% of their overall evaluation. Students failing to reach the set goals were credited on a prorated basis, meaning, for example, a student reading 50% of the goal would earn 50% of the total possible credit.

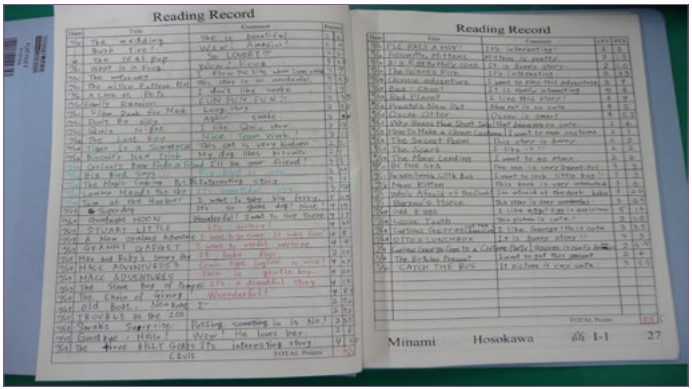

Figure 6. Sample student reading records.

One might consider the goals we set as somewhat high and wonder how many students actually achieved them. We had every expectation that many students would fall short, and some would fail to self-report at all, and this happened in fact. Results were rather inconsistent from class to class and year to year, so it is not possible to generalize. We found very rare cases of obvious cheating, but by and large students did comply to some degree and attitudes toward English generally and reading specifically noticeably improved compared with the previous year. I found that some students who were otherwise unremarkable in their class participation were voracious readers, which served as more motivation to continue my work with ER.

It is important to note that one of the obstacles we discovered in piloting this program was students' choice in selecting appropriate reading material. Many, particularly at the high school level, have experienced *intensive* reading and believe that reading in English is supposed to be challenging and often difficult. Convincing students to select books at, or preferably below, their reading ability levels has not been easy. This particular point, I have learned, needs to be reinforced in the initial introduction and orientation of ER to new students. Even students with relatively high English abilities should be either required or encouraged to begin their ER journey at a reading level below their actual ability in order to build reading fluency and speed, as well as confidence.

Activity in the library around the English book section increased dramatically. Circulation of English books increased fivefold over the prior year, and I was allocated budget from both the library and English Department to bolster the selection of books, particularly at the lower levels where, predictably, demand was highest. In that year, I was able to add nearly 400 additional titles to the section. Needless to say, despite the lack of support from many of my colleagues, they could not help but notice the dramatic increase in reading happening in some classes. As that year came to a close, the English Department head approached me and suggested that we

revisit my suggestions from a year prior and try to establish some sort of ER program for the entire student body.

Phase Two

Tasked with making another proposal to my colleagues, I prepared a case for the ER program I envisioned that was scaled down from my initial concept. By simply providing an optional framework that my colleagues could voluntarily make use of, I believed that it would be easier for them to accept. After positive discussions, I was asked to prepare a handbook explaining ER as well as whatever else I deemed necessary to launch a program. The librarians invited me to give an ER orientation to all incoming junior and senior high school freshmen, which I gladly accepted.

I designed a student and teacher ER handbook based on a much more comprehensive ER handbook in use currently at Tohoku University (Eichhorst & Shearon, 2013). It is an easy to read, bilingual document explaining the level and point system in use with our books. In addition, the guide explains the basic tenets and merits of participating in ER. Each student in the school has a personalized reading record stored in homeroom reading diaries kept at the circulation desk in the library, which teachers are free to access and make of use of as they see fit. The diary records reading activity including date, title, brief comments, level, and points of each book read. There is also a brief guide in Japanese, affixed to the inside cover of each class's reading diary, to assist students with filling out the diary (Figure 7). Although not every English teacher is making use of the ER program, awareness and acceptance of it has surely grown. In the past year, I have witnessed many students, both my own and those of other teachers, browsing through the English books and searching for interesting titles at appropriate reading levels based on the clear orientation I had provided them at the beginning of the school year. Very few of my own students are simply searching for the quickest and easiest read. Other teachers in my Department, who are not taking advantage of the ER system that I have developed, are still following past practices and simply assigning a book or two as holiday homework. This remains one of the biggest challenges to overcome.

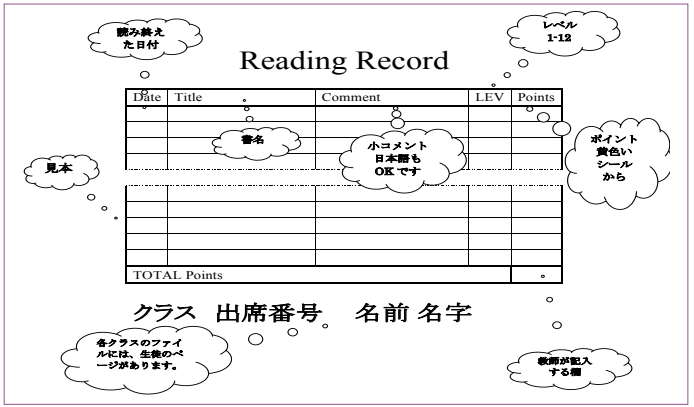

Figure 7. Instructions for filling out the reading record—affixed inside each class diary.

This is the second full year that I have been using ER in my classes. At present, together with a colleague who I share some classes with, I have approximately 250 students doing SSR in class weekly. I am also currently working with a class of 27 students who have returned recently from a year abroad, in a 100-minute per week course that is based solely on ER and expansion activities including reading, discussing, and presenting on self-selected, level-appropriate texts.

Future Prospects

The current situation in my school is somewhat peculiar. The administration seem very happy to have what appears to be an ER sec-

tion in the library, yet very few of my Japanese colleagues are taking full advantage of the work I have done to organize and structure the program. I have finally managed to convince the head of the English Department that the few Japanese colleagues using the graded readers are not actually engaged in ER whatsoever as they continue to assign holiday reading targets of one, two, or three books with no regard for level or point volume. For most teachers in my institution, the program is nothing more than window dressing.

However, I am pressing on with my own students and am refining my own program to better meet student needs, through improved instruction and guidance in ER. The data I collect this year should prove a good source for further analysis, which I expect to do as part of a study at the end of the academic year. The number of secondary schools making use of ER has been low, but increasing. Further research into the implementation and efficacy of programs for true beginners would be of great benefit to the field.

Limitations and Challenges

There are a number of factors that affect the establishment and administration of a program as described in this paper. Of these, a few stand out as particularly worthy of mention. Japanese secondary schools, and their teachers, tend to prefer the status quo, for innovation requires time and effort that many are not able or willing to invest. Overcoming this, in my situation, has proven the biggest challenge to overcome. In addition, traditional teaching methods of English make use of *katakana*—a phonetically rigid and often incompatible rendering of English words, which can detrimentally affect the development of learners at the earliest stages of reading.

Conclusion

Establishing an ER program of any kind is fraught with challenges. It would certainly have been easier to include only graded readers specifically written for L2 learners in my program. However, even with limited financial resources, an extensive collection of English books afforded the opportunity for me to work hard to make use of these existing resources. The discovery of the Japan-based *yomiyasusa* leveling system was invaluable. Students are able to assess and consider hundreds of authentic texts that, under a more traditional ER system with graded readers only, would be excluded. Such limitations would deny students access to much of what native English speakers came into contact with as young readers.

When considering an ER program design, special attention must be paid to the particular needs of learners at the very beginning of their exposure to second language literature. Reading for pleasure and general meaning may, depending on students' prior educational experience, be an entirely new notion to them. Although *intensive* reading is a common activity in many second language education programs, *extensive* reading may be new for learners at any age. Very well defined and narrow reading material grading is necessary to facilitate reading at the early stages of literacy development, and learners should be encouraged to begin their ER pursuit at a level far below their competency.

Librarians are also vital to a program's success. Most ER resources are stored in school libraries, and it is essential that librarians understand as much about the program design, structure, purpose, and goals as possible. They are on the front line for an ER program and can be a tremendous asset for any ER program administrator.

Support from colleagues can also be significant for growth and sustainability of in-class and out-of-class activities within the curriculum. Japanese teachers are extremely busy and frequently resist any kind of change, especially if such change would require additional work on their part. I believe that designing a program that requires a minimal amount of effort to maintain, while providing a well-recognized and understood benefit to students, stands a better chance of winning colleagues support and eventual or even partial adoption.

The program outlined above is still a work in progress. Unfortunately, as presently constituted, much of the workload to develop,

maintain, and improve the program has fallen on the shoulders of one individual. However, success has its inherent rewards. Seeing so many young learners actively engaged in reading second language texts is highly motivating as an educator, and I encourage anyone involved in English education for young learners to consider taking on the challenge.

Bio Data

Cory J. Koby will complete his MA in ELT at the University of East London in December, 2015. He has been a secondary school English teacher in Sendai, Japan for the past 7 years, and is currently serving as JALT Sendai chapter president. His present research focuses on the attitudes and perceptions of Japanese secondary school teachers of English in light of recent curriculum changes, specifically investigating the viability of communicative language teaching in high school. <corykoby@gmail.com>

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