

The Anatomy of an Extensive Reading Syllabus

Cory J. Koby

Miyagi Gakuin Women's University

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A great body of work related to extensive reading (ER) has been amassed over the past two decades. In recent times, much of the research has moved beyond the basic and focused on the many intricate facets of this relatively new field. But how does one go about starting an ER program? What are the steps one must take to get a program up and running? This paper takes a step backward and brings the reader to the starting line of the development of a 4-semester, 1st- and 2nd-year university ER program in order to answer many of the questions that arise when one attempts to create a similar program.

過去20年間以上、多読(ER)に関する研究が数多く発表されてきた。しかしながら、この比較的新しい研究分野でも、多くの研究は基本的なものを超え、より複雑な側面に焦点を当ててきている。しかし、新しくERを立ち上げるにはどうすればよいだろうか。プログラムを始動しうまく機能させるには、どのようなステップを踏めばよいのだろうか。本論文では、大きく基本に立ち戻り、指導者を4学期間の大学1年生と2年生のERプログラムの開発の出発点に導き、同様のプログラムを作成しようとするときに生じる多くの質問に答える。

A great body of work related to extensive reading (ER) has been amassed over the past three decades, which has helped advance this approach to second language acquisition and education (a comprehensive annotated bibliography of over 600 books and articles related to ER is available at <http://erfoundation.org/bib/bibliotop.php>). ER is now widely recognized amongst language educators throughout the world as an effective means of supplementing at least, and underpinning at best, second language education programs (Waring, 2006). Much of the research has moved beyond the basic and focused on the many intricate facets of this relatively new field. Yet how does one go about

starting an ER program? What are the various steps one must take to get a program up and running? This paper takes a giant step backward and brings the reader to the starting line of the development of a four-semester, 1st- and 2nd-year university ER program in order to answer many of the questions that arise when one attempts to create a similar program.

In this paper, I will briefly describe the academic context, student profiles, and the existing resources available prior to establishing this new ER program. I will then describe the various steps taken and factors considered during the design and implementation phases including

- the assessment of, and selection from the various book options available;
- the structure and content of the syllabus—including reading (readability) levels and reading volume targets;
- student orientation and introduction to ER;
- selection of readers, then monitoring student progress by way of an ER-specific learning management system (LMS) platform; and
- student performance assessment criteria.

Finally, suggestions for improvements will be presented, in light of the results from the first full year of the program's administration, most notably student compliance issues.

It should be noted from the outset that much of this program's design and implementation was based on the principles established by Day and Bamford (1998). This extensive publication, along with its companion summary (Day and Bamford, 2002), is widely viewed in the ER community as essential reading and serves as a perfect start for anyone new to ER. In addition, the program follows several of the pioneering ER principals established at a highly successful cram school in Tokyo, the Scientific Education Group (SEG), by its founder Akio Furukawa (Poulshock, 2015).

Setting the Stage

Students participating in this program are in the English department of Miyagi Gakuin Women's University (MGU)—a private 4-year liberal arts university located in northern Japan. The university ranks right in the middle of Japan's approximately 800 tertiary institutions that offer undergraduate degrees.

Existing Resources

Prior to the start of this new ER program in the 2016-17 academic year, the previous curriculum included a one-semester ER module in the 2nd year. Thus, previous instructors amassed a collection of approximately 1,000 English readers. Many of the readers were labelled on the front cover with word-count and *yomiyasusa* level—a learner-derived readability levelling system that originated in Japan (Furukawa et al., 2013)—as well as labelling the spine with coloured tape indicating beginner, intermediate, or advanced reading levels.

The books were situated in three locations within the English Department. The first was a pair of mobile carts that ER instructors would bring to their weekly classes and, when not in use, parked in what is called our “English Library,” which is akin to a common space for students in the department. Students had free, unmonitored access to these books, which were divided into several bins by their respective reading levels. The second location, where a majority of the advanced-level readers were placed on bookshelves, was a conversation “lounge” where students had free access to readers when not in use by instructors. The third location, where approximately 250 unprocessed readers were located, was the office that I was assigned to for the 2016-17 academic year.

In addition to the English Department's readers described above, the university's main library houses a collection of over 5,000 graded readers organized into six reading levels that are somewhat akin to the reading levels of the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF; see Figure 1). These books were ordered and organized over the past quarter-century by the Intercultural Studies Department. Although the books do have word counts affixed to each cover, the lack of *yomiyasusa* level indication and disparate levelling system have, until now, rendered them outside the purview of the English Department's program.

After an inspection of the resources of both the main library and the English Department, I was able to determine that, although a great number of intermediate and advanced readers were on hand, there was a dearth of beginner-level books that are essential in building readers' foundational reading skills and confidence. I therefore decided to focus my initial purchases and resource allocation on books written at lower stages of readability.

Designing the New Program

Book Selection and Organization


In order to build our collection of readers that are brought to the ER classrooms, we were provided with a faculty research grant of 670,000 yen, which we have used almost exclusively for the purchase of new books. ER practitioners do not all agree on the most appropriate material for readers (Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, 2009). Some believe that graded readers, written specifically for L2 learners, are most appropriate and should exclusively form the contents of an ER library collection (Bamford & Day, 1997). Others (e.g., Koby, 2015) believe that a wider selection of reading material including levelled readers written for native (L1) English speakers offers L2 learners opportunities to experience English language and the cultures in which it is embedded in a wider variety of authentic contexts. In addition to L2 graded and L1 levelled readers, in the spirit of Day and Bamford's (2002) second principle for teaching ER (which calls for the provision of a wide variety of reading materials of interest to the students), I have included a number of popular, lower level L1 books and series such as *Curious George*, *Magic Tree House*, *The Frog and the Toad*, and *Peter Rabbit*.

One of the principal challenges in organizing an ER library is dividing the books into levels that aid students in selecting material that they can read with ease. Traditionally, publishers have maintained their own proprietary levelling systems that have had little relation to one another. In recent years, there has been a move towards a more coordinated levelling system amongst publishers because of the Council of Europe's work in the 1990s on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). However, as the CEFR levels are rather broad, totalling just six, this system is not particularly helpful for organizing an ER library.

The ERF has synthesized dozens of publisher levels into a comprehensive 20-level ERF Graded Reader Scale (Figure 1), which is freely available to download and reuse from their website.

Although highly informative, the ERF Scale is based on publisher-reported headword levels that are derived from wordlists that are neither consistent between publishers nor generally available to the public. Therefore, in my view, a more consistent readability index is desirable.

One possibility would be to use the various L1 readability indexes such as the Flesch-Kincaid grade-level readability scale (Flesch, 1979). These offer methodically formulated readability scores based on sentence and paragraph word length and syllabic complexity, but fail to address L2 reading concerns such as word frequency and gram-



The Extensive Reading Foundation Grading Scale

Beginner				Elementary			Intermediate			Upper Intermediate			Advanced			Bridge			Near Native
Alphabet	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	12001-18000 and above
1	51	101	201	301	401	601	801	1001	1251	1501	1801	2101	2401	3001	3601	4501	6001	8001	
50	100	200	300	400	600	800	1000	1250	1500	1800	2100	2400	3000	3600	4500	6000	8000	12000	

This scale is only for approximate leveling of Language Learner Literature by headword¹ counts by series. Some individual titles may need to move up or down as necessary. A list of where each publisher's Graded Reader series fits this scale is available at the website.

Extensive Reading Foundation
www.ERFoundation.org

Figure 1. The ERF grading scale (Waring, 2013).

mathematical complexity. Another alternative is an L2 reader-derived readability scale created specifically for Japanese learners of English called the *yomiyasusa level* (YL) index developed in 2002. Now in its fourth edition, *The Complete Book Guide for Extensive Reading in English* (Furukawa et al., 2013) provides ER practitioners with a rather comprehensive list of YL levels as well as recommendation levels (reader ratings) for over 14,000 books ranging from YL 0.0 to 10.0. Much of the information, as well as more recent data, is freely available online at SEG's website (https://www.seg.co.jp/sss/YL/YL_tables.html).

Due to the ease by which students' can understand the YL scale, I decided to use it, along with word counts for each book, as the method for labelling and levelling books in our department's library collection. Thus, each book now has a label affixed to its front cover indicating both YL and word count. This serves as the foundation for the reading progression that students must follow in our ER program. It is expected that eventually all the readers in the main library collection will be labelled in the same way.

A second, complementary component of our reading program is derived from Furukawa's (2006) Start with Simple Stories approach and Eichhorst and Shearon's (2013) ER program at Tohoku University: the requirement that all students read a prescribed number of words at designated YLs before having the option of reading at higher YLs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Required Reading at Each *Yomiyasusa* Level Before Advancing

Yomiyasusa level (YL)	Words
0.0-1.0	10,000
1.1-2.0	100,000
2.1-3.0	150,000
3.1-4.0	200,000
4.1-5.0	250,000
5.1+	As many as possible

Reading Volume and Targets

The development of automaticity is critical in increasing reading fluency and comprehension (Sakurai, 2015; Beglar & Hunt, 2014). Reading fluency gains have been strongly correlated with reading volume (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010), thus our program was designed to foster improvements in both fluency and comprehension through high but achievable reading volume targets. The reading volume thresholds for this program are designed so that students meet or exceed Nishizawa et al.'s (2010) 300,000-word threshold at which measurable gains in performance on the TOEIC test have been identified.

In order to achieve a minimum passing grade, students must read a progressively rising volume in each of the four consecutive semesters (see Table 2). Based on findings in Beglar and Hunt's (2014) metastudy that most Japanese students are able to read a minimum of around 80 English words per minute when they enter university, it was determined that students should be able to read the required semester minimums with little outside-of-class reading. In the fifteen 90-minute classes each semester, with a rising word-per-minute reading rate, students should be able to read most of the 70,000, 90,000, 115,000, and 140,000 words respectively over the four consecutive semesters of the 2-year program. Thus, to achieve a minimum passing grade, students are required to read a total of no less than 415,000 words total throughout their first 2 years of university. This minimum reading volume surpasses Nishizawa et al.'s (2010) critical threshold of 300,000 words, thereby realizing one of the fundamental goals of the program—achieving measurable student performance increases.

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Of course, some students' reading speed varies from the rough WPM estimates above, and students will naturally be slowed by viewing images on the pages of the books, particularly at the lower YLs, which typically contain more visual support for the texts. Therefore, these are simply thumbnail estimates; some reading outside of class will be necessary in order to earn passing grades, particularly because students are required to take short quizzes to verify their comprehension of the books (see discussion below).

In-Class Activities

The focus of this program is to engage students in extensive reading of English texts in order to improve their reading speed and comprehension, as well as expand their grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, and cultural understanding of English in a natural context. Developing positive and productive reading habits are paramount to this goal, thus much of the time in class is devoted to silent, sustained reading.

Over the course of the four semesters, in order to maintain motivation and provide additional support for the main goal of the program, a number of in-class activities are being introduced. In the first semester, each student reads a self-selected 300-word passage out loud to the instructor on two separate occasions. Written and oral feedback intended to aid in the development of reading fluency are provided by the instructor. A specific focus on chunking—reading blocks of words together rather than sounding out individual syllables and words—is emphasized in the oral reading sessions. Additional activities (including timed reading, speed reading, book discussion groups, book reviews, and book presentations) are introduced in the second through fourth semesters, at the discretion of the instructor.

Student Orientation and Introduction to ER

Reading extensively in English is something that very few, if any, of our students have experienced prior to entering the ER classroom. During their high school English education, all have experienced intensive reading, which is an entirely different but complementary activity (Waring & McLean, 2015). Getting students to understand and accept these as two different pursuits is essential from the outset. Spending much of the first class introducing students to the purpose and methods of ER is time very well spent, in my experience.

In order to successfully prepare new students for the ER task to come, a bilingual printed introduction is distributed containing the essential information, which is also delivered in a PowerPoint presentation at the beginning of the first class. This information includes the

why and how of ER as well as expectations of students in terms of time and reading volume throughout the four semesters; samples of the books that they will encounter are also presented. Four essential rules of ER are emphasized during the presentation:

1. Choose books that you enjoy and feel free to change them if you lose interest.
2. Read at a level that you can completely or almost completely comprehend the text's vocabulary without the use of a dictionary. Guess the meaning of unknown words and, if you wish, make note of these words and confirm their meaning after you have completed reading the entire book.
3. Read as fast as you can while still following the general meaning of the story—placing emphasis on gist rather than complete, discrete-point comprehension (as is the focus in intensive reading).
4. Read often and read as long as you can, without losing concentration.

Student Performance: Monitoring and Assessment

Learning Management System and Online Library: Xreading

One of the central criticisms I have experienced regarding ER in an academic context is whether it is possible to verify that reading and comprehension have actually taken place. In order to confirm this, there are a number of options available to ER practitioners including book reports, reading diaries, student interviews, and two somewhat similar digital tools—*MReader* and *Xreading*. As a researcher, I particularly like the latter two because they automatically collect and provide quantitative data, especially in light of the somewhat high number of words and books students are expected to read. *MReader* contains an ever-expanding bank of quizzes for physical books, currently in excess of 5,500 titles. *Xreading* incorporates the entire *MReader* platform (using the exact same quizzes and setting options as *MReader*) and adds an e-book library with additional benefits for the learner (such as instant access to books) and for the instructor (including reading speed, rate of completion, and control of access to books by genre, level, or both).

In this program students are required to subscribe to *Xreading*. It provides students with the added flexibility and convenience of accessing books on demand and in a format that some prefer and all have tried. *Xreading* also provides audio for the books they offer, for which students have the ability to adjust the reading speed that they hear.

The only drawback to using the *MReader* quizzes (by way of *Xreading* in our case) is that it meant sorting the books inherited from the previous curriculum and pulling from circulation those not included in the quiz bank. At present, approximately 400 books are out of circulation awaiting quiz composition. *MReader* is a free service, so it relies

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on volunteer contributions of quizzes from various community members. Therefore, at some point in the future a portion of my research budget, time, or both will probably be allocated to this task.

Individual Student-Teacher Meetings

One of the hallmarks of this program is the personal contact students have with the instructor whilst in class. Classes are relatively small, averaging 23 students, so during each of the lessons the instructor meets briefly with every student to review her weekly progress and provide feedback and support when needed. During these meetings, students are provided with data that help them gauge whether or not they are on track to pass the class and what pace they will need to maintain until the end of the semester in order to earn desired final grades for the class. In the following section, the specific assessment criteria are described, which students are provided with during orientation as well as during each of these weekly student–teacher meetings. My subsequent experiences with this course (Koby, in preparation) have convinced me that personal contact with each student positively influences their motivation and thus effort in ER participation.

Assessing Student Performance

This program is intended specifically to focus on ER as its main activity. Therefore, 80% of overall student assessment is based on reading volume; the remaining 20% is based on in-class activities. Table 2 outlines the various reading volume thresholds for the four semesters.

Reading volume data is taken from the student records stored on *Xreading*, with only successfully passed quizzes being credited to the reading diaries. For online reading, I set the passing grade at 60%. For physical books, which have more complicated quizzes with variously weighted items, I set the pass threshold at 50% and adjust any quiz score of 47% or higher up to a passing score of 50%.

Table 2. Reading Volume Requirements by Semester

Grade	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 3	Semester 4	TOTAL
50%	70,000	90,000	115,000	140,000	415,000
55%	90,000	105,000	130,000	160,000	485,000
60%	115,000	125,000	145,000	180,000	565,000
65%	145,000	150,000	175,000	200,000	670,000
70%	170,000	170,000	200,000	230,000	770,000
75%	210,000	210,000	240,000	260,000	920,000
80%	250,000	250,000	300,000	300,000	1,100,000

The various grade levels rise by only a marginal amount each semester. This was intended to maintain motivation throughout the program and allow more students to feel more successful as their reading abilities improve. There is a rising step-size between the 50% and 80% grade levels because it is expected that, as learners increase their reading level, the book lengths also increase, so additional time-on-task will result in larger numbers of words read.

Looking Back at Year 1 to Inform the Future 1st-Year Successes and Challenges

Participants in the first year of this program consisted of the entire freshman class of 67 English major students at Miyagi Gakuin Women’s University. In the first semester, students read a total of approximately 9.3 million words, a mean of nearly 140,000 words per student and a median of 122,769 words. All participants passed—the student with the lowest volume read 71,648 words and five others surpassed the quarter-million word mark, indicating that the first semester of this program was successful. Figure 2 summarizes these results.

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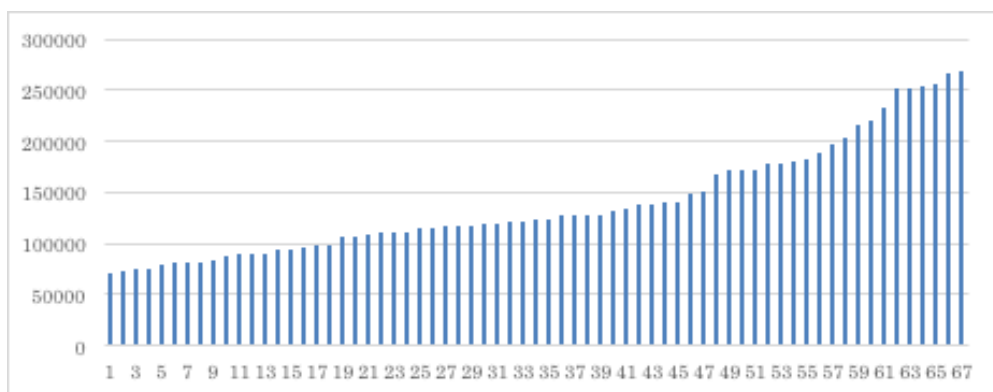


Figure 2. First semester reading volume by student.

Semester 2 results to date indicate that most, if not all, students will reach the minimum reading threshold of 90,000 words. However, based on reading volumes recorded at the start of the second semester, motivation does appear to be waning in some of the students. Therefore, I am currently collaborating with the instructor who will take over this first cohort next year to identify strategies to combat this.

Another complication that I have identified is the availability of two different quiz formats. A small number of students have realized that there are *Xreading* e-books and quizzes available for some of the physical books in our collection and have attempted to quickly leaf through the online version of the book then take the easier 5-item quiz with the physical book at hand, which significantly increases their chances of success on the quiz. By limiting the acceptable reading speed of the digital books, which instructors are able to do on *Xreading*, this has been somewhat curtailed, but it is certainly an issue in need of future consideration.

Looking Forward to Year 2 and Beyond

As the program moves into its 2nd year, the number of participants will double. Two instructors will be involved, so collaboration and coordination will be required of the instructors. We will continue to build our collection of physical books and move forward with the *Xreading* as well. I have established a working relationship with the developers of both *Xreading* and *MReader* and have shared the achievements of our students thus far. I expect that *Xreading* in particular will continue to adapt and improve based on the data

and feedback we will provide in the years to come. As we move forward into Year 2 of the program, there will be additional enhancements and features that will be presented in future papers.

Conclusion

This paper outlined the design and implementation of an extensive reading syllabus as well as the rationale for particular reading targets and assessment criteria. A somewhat ambitious reading target of at least 415,000 words over the 2-year ER program should be achieved by all or most of the participants, with the support of individualized attention provided by the instructors and an ER-specific LMS platform, which I have employed. Teachers considering the use of ER in their curriculum are encouraged to set high expectations for their students, as learners can rise to the challenge and achieve success when provided with the proper foundation and environment (Koby, in preparation).

Bio Data

Cory J. Koby is an assistant professor at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University and serves in his fourth term as JALT Sendai Chapter president. His present research focuses on extensive reading—particularly the design, implementation, management, assessment, and revision of the 2-year ER program described above. He is also an associate member of the Extensive Reading Foundation's Board of Directors. <corykoby@gmail.com>

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