

Transforming Negative Attitudes to Graded Readers

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Few would argue against the notion that English language learners can benefit significantly from reading extensively. However, in today's world, there are many distractions that make it harder than ever for students to develop the routine of "reading for pleasure" in their L2. This paper is a report on attempts to improve the graded readers component of an intensive EAP programme, with the aspiration of encouraging students to see the value of a less obviously "assessed" course element and develop attitudes and habits that will lead them closer to becoming more genuine extensive readers. It covers the successful adoption of a series of multiple-path readers designed specifically for the beginner level as well as students' experiences with electronic formats. In addition, it outlines a variety of ways that can be employed to lessen the stressful impact of assessment but still motivate reluctant readers to complete a minimum number of texts.

英語学習者にとって幅広く読むことが有利だという考え方に反対する者はほとんどいない。しかし、今日の世界では、学生達にとってこれまでよりもL2で「喜びのための読書」を習慣化することが難しくなっている。本稿では、EAPプログラムの段階別読本コンポーネントを改善するためのアクションリサーチについて報告し、あまり明らかに成績として評価されないコース要素の価値を学生が見出すよう推奨する。そして、より本物の「幅広く読む者(多読者)」に近づけるような態度や習慣を育てることを意図している。ここでは、初心者レベルのために特別に設計された一連のマルチパスリーダーをうまく取り入れ、電子形式(電子書籍)を学生が経験できるようにしている。さらに、「評価」のストレスの影響を軽減するためにさまざまな方法を試みているが、消極的な読者には最低限のテキストを完成させるよう動機付けをしている。

With the development of modern technology and the distractions of social media, it is becoming increasingly challenging for teachers to help foster healthy reading habits among language learners. In this paper I describe efforts to make students more engaged in the graded readers component of their 1-year intensive EAP programme,

including the introduction of a series of low-level "multi-path" books and some enquiry into students' preferences between paper and electronic formats.

Extensive Reading (ER)

Most English language educators today would agree that ER can be of considerable benefit to L1 and L2 learners and often leads to success in their intention "to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, pp. 193-194). Indeed, evidence of the virtues of ER has been building for over 70 years. Harold Palmer was apparently the first to use the term *extensive reading*, but credit for its methodology goes to Michael West for his work in 1950s on what he called "supplementary reading" (cited in Day, 2015). Elley (1991) presented nine studies from the 1970s and 1980s of "book floods" for children and concluded that benefits were evident in all areas and "effects [were] stable, and occur[ed] in pleasant, nonthreatening contexts, with associated gains in attitudes toward reading and books" (p. 408). Cho and Krashen cited "clear gains in vocabulary and reported increased competence in listening to and speaking English" in adult female ESL learners who become "clearly hooked" on a particular series of books they were directed towards (p. 662). Yamashita (2013) referred to a range of literature that provided both anecdotal and questionnaire-based support for ER as a valuable tool in improving L2 reading attitudes before introducing her own study that "showed increases in comfort and intellectual value and a decrease in anxiety" (p. 248). Nation (2015) focused on how ER can assist vocabulary learning but agreed that it has potential to benefit all aspects of language development.

Defining ER

Although it is a concept that most professionals in the language teaching profession have repeatedly encountered, there is still some confusion as to what exactly constitutes

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ER. Day and Bamford (1988) listed a number of basic characteristics of a successful ER approach:

- *Students read as much as possible . . .*
- *A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available . . .*
- *Students select what they want to read . . .*
- *The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding. . . .*
- *Reading is its own reward. . . .*
- *Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students. . . .*
- *Reading is individual and silent, . . .*
- *Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower. . . .*
- *Teachers orient students to the goals of the program, explain the methodology, keep track of what each student reads, and guide students . . .*
- *The teacher is a role model of a reader for students. . .* (pp. 7-8, italics in original)

Although ER and graded reading are often seen as one and the same, as Waring (1997) made clear, there are differences between them. Graded reading always uses specific materials and is designed “for readers to read enough material at one level to develop sufficient fluency and other forms of linguistic knowledge to enable them to move to a higher level” (para. 3). Graded readers of an appropriate level should allow students to engage in true ER, as opposed to intensive reading in which they are required to analyse the text carefully and make regular use of dictionaries to comprehend meaning.

The Difficulty of Fostering True ER in an Intensive EAP Programme

The students involved in this study were all enrolled at the Tokyo campus of NIC International College in Japan, a small college aimed at helping students to develop the language skills necessary to study alongside native English speakers at an overseas institution within 12 months. There are six class levels, and students progress to the next stage at the end of each semester, providing they have passing grades. Given that the programme’s *raison d’être* is to prepare students for academia in English-medium courses overseas, motivation levels are extremely high, even at lower levels. Although there are of course exceptions, most students have a more favourable attitude towards English than

is generally found among non-English majors taking compulsory English classes in Japan. Course components include academic reading and vocabulary study; writing paragraphs, essays, and research papers (depending on class level); making newspaper article summaries, and so on. Given that the students need to submit written English assignments on a daily basis, the requirement to complete one graded reader and a short book report weekly may seem to be one of the less stressful tasks.

However, echoing the findings of Krashen (1985) and others, there are a significant number of students at all class levels who fail to appreciate the value of reading for pleasure, and many consider it to be a waste of time that would be better spent in more academic endeavours. Noncompletion rates are higher than in any other component of the course, and plagiarism of book reports is common. Due to time constraints and the demands and expectations placed upon students, it is admittedly extremely difficult to implement a true ER approach, by which learners are inspired to read as much as they can for their own pleasure. However, I believe that part of the problem stems from students being offered the levels of graded readers that have been deemed to be ideally appropriate for their class level, rather than for their actual reading level. This forces some students to engage in intensive reading or to simply neglect to complete the assignment properly. It would appear that the teachers’ lack of understanding of the principles of a true ER programme and the realities of their classroom context make it difficult for them to effectively implement one. Macalister’s (2010) investigation into teachers’ attitudes towards ER acknowledged this as well as the teachers’ difficulty in abiding by Day and Bamford’s (1988) fifth principle (Reading is its own reward) when required to monitor actual participation.

Class Context NIC-3

Students who do not manage to progress beyond the high beginner (HB) class remain at that level for a second semester and possibly beyond. This could be due to a variety of reasons: insufficient improvement of skill levels, failure to fully comprehend the workload of an “intensive EAP” programme, or poor attendance as a result of ill health or having overextended themselves with work commitments. But it is most likely due to basic motivational issues. Consequently, it is quite common to have a third-semester class of 15-20 students who haven’t made the progress that they had hoped for. This class is simply named NIC-3, and there are far wider ranges of ability and motivation in this class than in regular classes.

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In January 2016, there were 18 students in the NIC-3 class, 11 of whom had never progressed beyond HB, and seven who had spent the second semester in low intermediate (L1) level but had not progressed. I was appointed as the course instructor. Having been the instructor of two second-semester L1 classes, I had already experienced teaching the 7 L1 students. Although they had failed to progress to the intermediate level, these were relatively active, outgoing individuals who were familiar with my teaching style and expectations. Such familiarity proved to be of significant benefit to everyone involved, as this energetic group seemed to have a positive impact on the others.

Completion rates for initial assignments were far better than anticipated, but there was still concern about the graded readers component of the course. It had been established that several class members had failed to complete a single book over two full semesters in the previous year. I reasoned that if these recalcitrant individuals could experience some pleasure in reading, this may have a so-called knock-on effect and lead to an all-round improvement in attitude and motivation. Essentially, an element of ER could hopefully contribute to learner progress and kick-start a virtuous learning circle that would lead to gains in graded reading, too.

Introduction of Game Books

The challenge was finding texts that would be engaging without being too difficult. There was also a necessity to check that books were actually being read, but without this being too stressful for the students. It was decided that the use of the more traditional graded readers would be alternated with the Atama-ii (<http://www.atama-ii.com/>) series of 10 multipath stories, set at high-beginner (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR, A1+) level with 300 headwords and approximately 2,500 words in length. Because these books are available in both paper and electronic formats, students were also given opportunities to explore their preferred format. Upon completion of each book, they responded to a short survey I had created.

Results

Naturally, some of the 10 titles were more popular than others, but the overall response was far more positive than what the same students had shown towards the traditional readers. When asked “What did you think of this book?” and provided choices of *poor*, *fair*, *good*, *very good*, and *excellent*, 76% of 103 recorded responses were *good* or higher, with just 24% *fair* or *poor*. Although reactions to the traditional readers also improved over the course of the semester (perhaps as a consequence of positive reading experienc-

es), favourable responses remained significantly lower and never exceeded 60%. It should also be noted that students were offered a far wider variety of titles when using the traditional readers than when choosing from the 10 multipath books. At least 50 titles were offered for selection in class, and those who had difficulty finding something suitable were encouraged to choose from the hundreds available in the college library.

Choice-Making in Reading

The publishers of the Atama-ii series have argued that “the choice-making aspect of reading game books is a great way to foster critical thinking” (Attama-ii Books, 2017, para. 3), but it could be claimed that this EFL-specific version of the traditional choose-your-own-adventure genre is even more fundamentally effective as simply being a way to help students avoid sleeping during individual silent reading. The postcompletion surveys contained the responses in Table 1. Follow-up interviews revealed that this was the primary reason for many students’ enjoyment of the texts. As the results show, even among the negative responses to the stories, it was not uncommon for a student to nonetheless indicate that it was easier than normal to concentrate. There was also a claimed completion rate of 100%, as opposed to 79% claimed for the traditional readers, and although it may be that neither of the numbers match reality, the variety of completed book reports, oral summaries, and online quizzes seem to support them. Given that students only had to reach one of the eight endings in each book, they could complete the assignment by reading less than 10 pages, but most would go on to read far more and even reach all of the individual endings.

Table 1. Postcompletion Survey About Atama-ii Books (N = 103)

Question	Positive	Neutral	Negative
How much did you enjoy making choices to decide the story?	81%	3%	16%
How easy was it to concentrate on this book, compared to a traditional reader?	86%	5%	9%

Breaking the Seventh Law

Encouraged by reactions to these multichoice readers, I decided to experiment a little further and have students engage in an activity that ran explicitly against one of Day and Bamford’s (1988) defined characteristics of successful ER—that it be individual and silent.

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In the computer lab, students were asked to work in pairs to select a title and a format (paper or electronic), read alternate sentences aloud until reaching a decision point, then debate which path to follow. The purpose of this was to provide this relatively low-level class with an opportunity to engage in the pragmatic acts of polite disagreement and negotiated decision making. Once again, results were interesting. Transcripts of recordings provided numerous examples of effective communication, and although discussion of these results is beyond the scope of this paper, it is relevant that students genuinely enjoyed the exercise, as was apparent from the lively, laughter-filled (and admittedly not always polite!) exchanges throughout the room.

At the Higher Levels

The Premature Declaration of the Death of Paper?

The relative success with the NIC-3 class of the January-April 2016 semester led to further efforts to make the graded readers component of the program more effective in all subsequent classes, regardless of the level. For the following semester (April-August 2016), I was appointed to the low advanced (LA) level class of 17 highly motivated students, all with TOEFL PBT scores above 500, who engaged in writing lengthy academic essays and developing skills for effective research. From the beginning of this semester, the college had subscribed to the xreading.com service, providing all students with online access to several hundred graded readers, and I considered it an appropriate time to further examine student preferences regarding book formats (see Table 2).

Table 2. Student Preferences for Graded Reader Format (N = 79)

Format	Number
Paper	48
Online	12
No preference	19

The results came as something of a surprise to the faculty involved, as there had been a general perception that today's students were far more electronically minded, and the overall preference that the NIC-3 class had shown was clearly for the electronic versions of the multipath series. However, these had always been read on a modern, large desktop screen in a well-lit computer lab with a reliable Internet connection. It is worth a brief examination of the main reasons for either choice.

Those who expressed a preference for online readers commonly mentioned the following:

- Can read anytime, anywhere,
- Never dirty,
- Can read in dark,
- Useful on crowded train,
- Greater choice,
- Paper books are heavy,
- Always have my smartphone,
- Has audio versions, and
- Can easily check new vocabulary.

The most common reasons for preferring paper books were

- Less eye-strain,
- Doesn't drain smartphone battery,
- Doesn't rely on WiFi connection,
- Sometimes system is down, can't access,
- Don't have to waste time logging in,
- No problems with passwords, and
- Not tempted to start doing something else online.

Subsequent interviews established that a majority of students liked some aspects of the online reader system but were put off by current limitations regarding quality of reading devices and connectivity issues. It must also be said there were some teething troubles in the college using the system for the first time (efficiently registering students, ensuring sufficient Internet bandwidth at all times, etc.), and although these are perhaps inevitable, they do nonetheless contribute to more negative perceptions among faculty and students. One would assume such issues would become less problematic in the future. A further question for the students was "Which would you prefer to use next semester, paper books, online electronic books, or a mixture of both?" Responses indicated that the majority of students would still like to see online readers being offered at least as an option (see Table 3).

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Table 3. Student Preferences for Graded Reader Format in the Following Semester (N = 79)

Format	Number
Both	32
Paper	30
Online	17

The 17 members of the LA class all progressed to the high advanced (HA) class starting in September, and it was encouraging to see from the data available that most had continued to utilise their access to the xreading.com system during the summer vacation. Some had read one or two books, but others had read considerably more, and one student who had returned to her home in an extremely rural area completed several books per week, making a point to express her gratitude for having had this resource available to her. It was heartening to hear of a student having indulged in such genuine ER. If only it were more common!

Potential for Higher Level Multipath Graded Readers

Given the low headword count of the Atama-ii series, these texts are not deemed to be sufficiently challenging for LA level students. However, after their weekly timed writing assignment in the computer lab one day, they were given the option to use the multipath readers during the remaining 15 minutes of class. This was intended simply as an optional way to relax, and students were still able to choose one of the more regular tasks, such as reviewing vocabulary, practicing typing skills, or reading their current (CEFR B2 target level, 2000+ headwords) graded reader. It was explained that they were welcome to read them individually or approach them in the pair format outlined above. Six pairs formed in the class, and once again, the result was a pleasant contrast from the silence necessitated by the previous timed writing session, with considerable laughter and good-natured argument conducted in the target language. The allocated 15 minutes expired, but despite being informed of the beginning of the 10-minute break period, several pairs continued to read until they had completed each of the alternative readings. Acceding to student requests, the same option was provided after the next timed writing session, and on this occasion, all members of the group took part and appeared to enjoy the activity immensely. Although this was the last time to use the texts in the LA class, the students were alerted to their availability through the xreading.com system that they were already

using.

An informal feedback session was held one week later, and once again, the requirement to actively make decisions was instrumental in making these books sufficiently appealing for several students to read them outside of class or their regular required coursework—without falling asleep. Of course, students were fully aware of the relative simplicity of the texts, but their level of enjoyment highlighted the fact that too often in the past they had been encouraged or perhaps even forced to tackle graded readers that were not “well within the reader’s linguistic competence” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 7). Among those who read more than one or two of the Atama-ii books, there was an acknowledgement of the formulaic nature of the stories, as well as some frustration at having to waste time returning to the beginning of the story after each ending. Although such comments were far less common among the NIC-3 class members, for whom the rereading of early pages was in fact more often listed as a positive element, it seems reasonable that more proficient students would feel this way. Nonetheless, comments were undoubtedly positive enough to suggest that there would be an interest in higher level texts of a similar style. At the time of writing, only those at the 300-headword level are available from Atama-ii.

Greater Variety of Materials

Teachers often like to have all students working through texts that are of the same series, length, and difficulty level, as this facilitates easier observation of progress and ensures a similar workload for each student. However, such a mentality runs counter to the fundamental aims of ER, and there has been a conscious effort from some faculty members to allow students greater flexibility in the difficulty level of the books they select. This means not only providing a wide range of genres and types and allowing access to graded readers that are intended for lower classes, but also having options for the better readers, particularly those in the LA and HA classes who are perhaps rather jaded by the standard Penguin, Oxford, or Cambridge readers. Having been referred to the M-Reader site to see which texts were covered, I first became aware of “Quick Reads,” a not-for-profit series of short novels (approximately 100 pages) written by a host of famous and best-selling authors and intended to encourage greater adult literacy in the UK. The introduction of 20 titles from this series was well received by LA class members, some of whom had read Japanese translations of full-length books by the same authors and felt that such authentic short novels provided a useful stepping stone in giving them the confidence to attempt the original English-language versions of the writers’ most popular titles. For the more proficient readers, this step beyond typical Level 6 3000-headword graded readers

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is necessary if true ER is to be fostered, as its aim is to enable the learner to “deal with native level texts fluently” (Waring, 1997).

Greater Variety of Monitoring Techniques

It is with considerable embarrassment that I recollect requiring students in years past to produce weekly 4-page book reports. Subsequent classes saw a simplification of the book report, and by 2016 it never exceeded a single page. However, given the formulaic manner in which students were completing these reports and the level of plagiarism in submissions by otherwise diligent scholars, a wider range of activities was necessary to allow progress and participation to be monitored without the task being so arduous that students would associate the successful completion of a text with another taxing written assignment. Follow-up activities during the April-August 2016 semester were almost entirely conducted in class and included oral reports, paired question-and-answer sessions, “speed reviews” (giving students just 1 minute to scribble down their thoughts on the book), brief character analyses, simple sketches of favourite scenes, and skits performing the most dramatic moments. Each week involved a different type of activity. The only regular requirement was a one-line entry in a book file listing the title, author, date completed, a short sentence or keywords to later remind them of the story, and a score out of 5 to record their impression of it.

Conclusions

First and foremost, this ongoing effort to improve use of graded readers has shown me that there is a need for teachers to identify objectives and explain them before distributing texts to their classes. Simply bringing 20 books to a class of 18 students and telling them to take one, read it, and fill out a book report is not an ER programme. Nor is it even effective graded reading when the books provided are far beyond the level of most students, who are aware that the teacher will barely give submitted reports a brief glance before awarding a check mark for completion. If the instructor fails to show any effort or enthusiasm in dealing with graded readers, it is unfair to criticise students for reacting in the same vein. Although use of graded readers is generally considered an out-of-class course component, it is crucial that in an initial lesson the teacher explains the purpose and value of the activity and helps to persuade students to move away from the habit of constantly going to their dictionaries, which shows they are reading intensively rather than extensively.

Variety is necessary in facilitating positive reading experiences among learners. There is a need for a wide range of books that offer a choice of classic or modern, sci-fi or romance, mystery or comedy, fiction or nonfiction—as well as more unusual genres such as “choose-your-own-adventure” and other interactive types. Students should be given access to books at a level that will engage them rather than traumatise them and turn them away from the practice. There is also a need to consider a variety of formats, embracing the possibilities provided by e-books and online material while recognising that there is still a place for printed texts. The third area where variety is crucial is the manner in which teachers monitor progress. A busy teacher often seeks to establish a pattern that allows regular assignments to be set, conducted, and evaluated, with familiar instructions for students to accomplish without confusion. But the proverb “familiarity breeds contempt” appears to ring especially true when learners fail to fully appreciate the value of an educational assignment; a one-size-fits-all mentality is not conducive to fostering positive attitudes to reading, given the range of students’ abilities, interests, motivational levels, and personal circumstances. By refusing to take the easiest path and continually striving to modify and adapt the way graded readers are utilised, it is hoped that more teachers can encourage learners to become genuine extensive readers, providing a considerable advantage in developing their language skills.

Bio Data

Andy Lawson is an instructor on an intensive 1-year EAP program. He is currently seeking to link his research interests more directly with his classroom in order to better prepare students for their upcoming enrolment in overseas colleges and universities and would welcome any interest in collaborating on such matters. <naritalawson@gmail.com>

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