Learner Reflections on Extensive Reading Materials

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This paper presents a summary and analysis of qualitative data on learner preferences in extensive reading materials. The study used data collected during one academic year from three convenience samples (intact classes) totaling 94 students, of which 87 both responded and agreed to allow the researcher-instructor to use responses for research. The learners were all first-year students in majors other than English in a required English Reading course at a private university in Japan. The learners were required to choose extensive reading materials, read, and describe them every week, and to complete five guided reflections over two semesters as part of the reading course. The data presented is from the responses to several questions related to how the learners chose readers, the types of books they liked to read, and what made for good or interesting books. Results support the principles of providing variety, choice, and easy materials for extensive reading.

One of the keys to extensive reading is that students read a high volume (Day & Bamford, 1998, 2002; Waring & McLean, 2015). However, many instructors in university EFL courses in Japan have struggled with how to motivate learners to read for extensive reading (Bieri, 2015a, 2015b; Stoeckel, Reagan, & Hann, 2012). Day and Bamford (1998, 2002) advocate giving learners choice of reading materials. Lien (2010), in research which compared preferences for graded versus unsimplified texts, concluded that "texts are actually a key to motivating students to keep on reading" (p. 203), while Lake (2014) noted, "choice in reading materials in terms of topics and text features becomes important in maintaining interest" (p. 18) and that reading to their own interests may contribute to learners' continuing L2 reading.

As an instructor in Japan struggling to motivate my EFL readers, I wanted to both try to understand more about what kinds of reading materials interested and motivated my learners and to help guide them toward making explicit, reasoned choices that would lead to sustained reading habits. Other researchers have made similar efforts in their own contexts in recent years. Nişancı, Saadi, and Said (2015) explored the types of books Saudi university students preferred for extensive reading, asking them to rate nine types of texts on a scale from really liking to not liking at all. The categories they presented were a mix of genres (e.g., detective stories), topics (e.g., books about animals), and other classifications (e.g., short stories) and their categories often overlapped. However, they primarily concluded that there was a variety of individual preferences, while the data presented showed a significant preference for short stories. Hanisch (2015), in a Master's thesis, explored preferences of young EFL

learners in a program in Austria through a combination of questionnaires and reading diaries, and noted some trends and gender differences in selection by level and book types (genre and subject area).

Lien (2010) suggested that research into needs and preferences "may need to incorporate qualitative methods" (p. 203). As part of encouraging critical self-reflection in my reading courses, I asked my students to provide written reflections on their reading every few weeks and included questions related to how they made their extensive reading choices, what levels, genres, and topics were selected, their amount of reading, and so on. This research report describes results from an analysis of these qualitative responses in the hope that other instructors in similar settings may use them to guide their own extensive reading practice.

Setting

This research was conducted on three intact classes taught by the researcher at a private university in central Japan. All incoming students were required to sit an English placement test, separated by faculty, and then streamed by level into required English courses. One course in this study consisted of students only from the Economics faculty, another included students from three majors in the Liberal Arts faculty, and the third included students from the Foreign Languages faculty who were majoring in French, German, or Spanish.

The classes were required first-year English Reading courses. These courses were part of the basic requirements for all students, and delivered by full-time and part-time instructors from an English education center that was administratively independent of all faculties in the university. The senior language instructor of the center guided all instructors in setting shared objectives for courses of the same title, and then each instructor independently designed and taught their own courses and syllabi. The reading courses met for 90 minutes once a week for 15 weeks a semester and both intensive and extensive reading were expected to be part of the course.

For these courses, the instructor spent roughly half of the class time on extensive reading activities and the other half on intensive reading practice and skill building using commercially available EFL reading textbooks. During the first two classes of the semester, students were oriented to extensive reading. This included an introduction to the difference between headwords, which is one indicator of difficulty level, and running words, a measure of length. They also learned that they would choose their own materials, and were guided in how to use the covers to determine genre, level, etc. when choosing books. Students were required to choose and read at least one graded reader each week, to achieve regular word count targets and demonstrate them by passing Mreader quizzes, to discuss their recent reading with other students each week, and to submit reading reflections three times each semester. A handful of the higher-ability students frequently chose to read and discuss books for native-speaker teens or young adults rather than graded readers.

Method

Data Collection

Learners in all three courses were required as part of their coursework and reflective practice to write reading reflections during course time, each of which required responses to five or more prompts. As graded work, the reflections were neither

voluntary nor anonymous. The responses were expected to be in English and were graded as part of their productive language use for the course, though a few students did not understand the directions and wrote their responses to the first reflection in Japanese. During the first semester, the students were expected to complete a reflection in the fifth, tenth, and fifteenth classes. They were given A4 sheets with the questions in English and space for answers on one side, and given class time to write their answers by hand. In the second semester, they completed them in the fifth and tenth classes. For convenience of collection and giving feedback as well as to save paper, the instructor chose to switch to online forms in the second semester. The students had been expected to develop English typing skills in their writing classes by this point, and in the reading class they were given a link to an online form with several prompts and asked to use the computers in the classroom to submit their responses.

Institutional research ethics policies for classroom research discourage any activity which is not part of normal coursework, and at the time of this research there was a particular sensitivity to collecting any personal information. Therefore, data such as age, gender, scores on standardized tests, etc. were not collected. Based on the streaming levels from the English placement test and instructor observation, most of these students could be described as high beginners with limited fluency in reading and oral production. However, approximately a dozen of the foreign languages majors showed varying degrees of fluency and could be described as intermediate or advanced.

All students were given a written and verbal explanation of the research in the first class and an opportunity to opt in or out with no adverse effect if they choose not to participate. At the end of the academic year, they were once again given an opportunity to opt in or out of the research. While initially there were 94 total students enrolled in these three courses, four students did not actually attend any classes and three others opted out of the study. Permission was granted by 31 students in one class, 30 in another, and 26 in the third, for a total of 87 respondents. Students who were absent in any of the sessions which included the reading reflections above were not allowed to submit the reflection for that week and in some cases students skipped individual questions. Seven students did not answer one or more of the questions addressed in this analysis; Table 1 shows the number of respondents for each item.

Table 1. The number of respondents for each item

Item	n
What kinds of books do you like to read most? Why?	86
What is the most interesting thing you've read for this course? Why?	83
What graded readers have you enjoyed? Why? What made them good?	84
How do you choose which graded readers to read?	84
What makes you want to read more?	86

Data Analysis

The handwritten responses to the first three reflections were typed into a spreadsheet by the instructor, and the responses typed into the online forms by students were copied and pasted in, with the instructor making no corrections for spelling or grammar in any. The responses were kept grouped by question along one axis and by respondent along the other, then the data was blinded

with learner names removed from the database. The researcher then followed an inductive, or data-driven, coding process aimed at categorizing, defining and analyzing the qualitative data (see Gibbs, 2007; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014 for discussions of coding). The researcher read through all the responses and identified and recorded key words and phrases that appeared and created a set of categories. Then these categories were used to code the responses and the number of responses of each type was tallied. In furtherance of a rich, respondent-based illumination of these categories, particularly illustrative responses were selected for presentation. The resulting descriptive statistics and illustrative examples of learner responses, with spelling and other errors intact, are presented below.

Results

Types of Books

When answering about what kinds of books they liked to read, it is perhaps unsurprising that nearly 83% of responses included some reference to fiction, non-fiction, or one or more specific genres such as mystery, love stories, and biographies. Fiction was preferred by 69.4% of the respondents, while non-fiction was preferred by only 9.4%, and the remaining 21.2% described enjoying both. Overall, 39.5% of responses made reference to more than one genre, with a few students mentioning as many as three or four genres in one response.

Within fiction, love stories, adventure, and mystery or detective stores were widely mentioned. One learner, who wrote one of the longer responses to this item, described why they liked love stories.

> The books i like to read most are love stories. Love stories are not jyust romantic but also

cintains sadness, happiness of love and its not always serious and sometimes funny. A lot of love stories contain the relationship betwen the couple but no only that it also shows us the relationship between the people around you. Which I think is very interesting. I also like to compare peoles life in the story and my real life because its very fun. Love stories are not always serious but its funny this is what I like most about it.

Another wrote, "*some times I laugh at the way someone show their love to their lover, sometimes I moved the way someone show their love to their lover.*" For mystery and detective stories, respondents described things like enjoying trying to puzzle out the answers, anticipating what kind of ending would happen, and being excited until they know the ending. One representative response was, "*I like reading mystery books. I like them beause I forget the time while I am reading and want to read ahead and ahead. The good part about mystery books are that you can solve the mystery yourself while reading.*" On the other hand, some students described specifically why they disliked this kind of story. For example, one wrote, "*I don't like thriller or murder story because it is scared and I couldn't read it all.*" Another noted, "*Recently, I'm not enjoying reading horror stories and detective stories because relationships of characters are a litlle difficult to understand and I feel often gloomy.*" These respondents as a whole showed a lot of variety in the genres they enjoyed reading and the reasons for it. One stated, "*I like to read fiction books. Because they have variety of stories like interesting, mistery, sad, love story and so on. When I read fiction books, I feel like to be in the book. I like it.*"

Of those who mentioned liking non-fiction, one wrote, "*I like non-fiction or the stories based on real events. Sometimes it is hard to understand what happened in stories in english. Especially fantasy stories are difficult. Non-fictions*

are based on reality so I can imagine easily." The same student also wrote, *"I especially like the book focus on person. Made-up stories can't beat real stories."* Another student wrote, *"I like non fiction books because I can learn many thing from them. Especially, I ilke the series 'The Global Issues'. Furthermore, in non fiction books, there are useful words I can use to debate. That's why I like non-fiction."* There were five mentions of enjoying biographies specifically, including this one: *"I read biography the most. I love those kind of books because I can know how those people made succeed in their lives. Also most of them, I can learn histry and the era that people lived. I love histry so that is interesting."* Even among those interested in non-fiction, there were a variety of topics and reasons for liking them mentioned.

Another factor described was how the stories made them feel, noted by 40.2% of students, and the next most common was mentioning a specific publisher or series, mentioned by 19.5% of the students. One student expressed how they enjoy reacting to books. *"I like to read love story. Because usually it ended with happy end. So it makes me happy. And when I read it I feel as if I am also in love. And I also enjoy thinking about what feeling does the main character have."* Another example is, *"I like to read books about adventure most. When I read these books, the books thrills me. When some love enters, I like it more. The time reading these books, oneself feels having an adventure with a chief character, too."* Quite a few of these students made comments about liking books that made them feel happy, such as, *"I also like funny fantasy because it makes me laugh hard and makes me happy and relaxed."*

Slightly over 17% mentioned liking books that were in some way useful, such as providing information to use in their club or in other courses. One person noted, *"I like history so much. Becase I study some wisdom*

and morality." Later, they wrote, *"I like non-fiction books. Because, I can syudy world's problem and great parson's way of life. So, I get knowledge."* Another student wrote, *"The informations of this book are good studying for me. I'm a member of Debating Club. The topics which the series picks up are debatable and many opinion are explained in these books."* Another stated, *"I'd like to read many books about economy a little more. Because I'm a student of a department of economics."*

The next most common factor, level or ease of books, was cited by 11.5% of students while length was noted by 6.9%. Other factors mentioned by a couple of students each were being familiar stories, such as ones from movies, being biographies, and liking certain types of characters. One of the students noting types of characters said, *"I like to read the books which have a heroine. Usually it ends happily but some do not. Her surroundings say many different things to her, hence she consider, wonder, think and act. I like the steps which she grow up gradually."* Also, one student mentioned a specific author they enjoyed reading, saying, *"I like Kotaro Sawaki the best. His honest and brief sentences are great and his eyes are very soft."*

Specific Books

Two questions asked learners about specific readings they had enjoyed. The first time it was phrased as, "What is the most interesting thing you've read for this course? Why?" Most answered with a specific book they found interesting, and some of them also gave reasons, but this prompt also elicited several unanticipated responses. A few students mentioned the textbook passages, a few mentioned whole series or specific publishers, one responded with *"English books"* and another included *"story in English"*, and there were even a couple who mentioned the reading quizzes. Additionally, a few students appeared to

completely misunderstand the question and wrote totally unrelated answers. Therefore, the prompt was later changed to, "What graded readers have you enjoyed? Why? What made them good?" While both of these questions aimed to address specific texts the students enjoyed, even the second one elicited a large number of responses about types, series, and so on. However, the ultimate goal was to find trends in why they enjoyed books, and those that did answer with reasons gave some insight into that.

By far the most common theme was that the story was somehow interesting, engaging, or fun, one of which was mentioned at least once by 48% of the students. A typical response of this type was, "*I found it's fun and interesting. I know there are more books of this series so I want to read them. I think the relations and accidents or conflicts made this story fun.*" The next most common reasoning, noted by 33% of the students, was the material being level appropriate or easy to read. One said, "*I enjoyed the wizard of oz so far. It was a little easy but, some time there were pictures to help the readers to imagen the story. This is what I like about it.*" The reading providing them with some kind of new or useful knowledge or information was noted by 16% of the students. One noted the following connection with her planned career, "*'Thodore Boone - Kid Lawyer' was the most interesting because it was about law and that kind of stuff. I learned about some laws through the book which will a little help with my dream of becomng a policewoman.*" Having some kind of shared experience with the protagonist in the story, and gaining some credit for the class, were each noted by four students (4.6% of respondents). One student commented as follows about shared experience, "*Sarmon, the hero of the story, was suffered many difficult problems for her new school life. I can sympathize with her difficulty. I was also had difficult problems.*" Not all students

provided answers to why they liked certain materials, while some provided multiple reasons, and therefore the percentages do not total 100.

Choosing Books

"How do you choose which graded readers to read?" aimed to identify the factors involved in choosing books. Most students noted more than one factor in their decisions, with difficulty level (45%) and length (35%) being the most common. Learners commonly indicated using series levels and headwords, as well as overall length, to help determine difficulty, and 4.5% mentioned using preview reading to gauge difficulty and/or interest. One wrote, "*I look through the book once and see how difficult the words are, and I also check the back cover of the book and see what kind of level that book is.*" Another noted, "*I choose the book which has about 4,000 words. At first, I used to read the books which have about 2,000 words, but I thnk my English reading skill becomes up. So I challenge the book which has 4,000 words.*" Some of these students also talked about changing the level they chose at different times, like this one: "*I often choose books which just rading levels for me. But sometimes, I haven't enough time to read, I put down reading levels or choose more thin book which I often read.*" When they are busy or tired they may opt for easier books or when they want a challenge or think they have improved they may go up a level.

On the other hand, 9% of students specifically noted that they do not consider level when choosing books. One student wrote, "*I choose graded readers by the title, back cover, authors, etc. if it's interesting or not. But I don't really look at the grades when I choose them.*" Similarly, another noted, "*I don't choose the book according to the grade.*" while yet

another said, "*I don't choose books by Level. I read a book that I'm interested in.*"

Additionally, the book's genre, topic or the contents appearing interesting was noted by 25% of the students, the cover as a factor by 12.6%, and the title by 8%. Looking at pictures in the book was mentioned by 9%, two students mentioned checking the author, and one each mentioned popularity of the book, friends' recommendations, and being a new story. Also, one student said they simply use their "*intuition*".

Motivating

"What makes you want to read more?" elicited a number of responses similar to the reasons students described for liking books. It may be unsurprising to readers that the most common factor noted was interesting or funny stories or topics, with 42.5% of students commenting on that. A great example is, "*Sometimes, I could read very interesting books, for example, love story and moving story. So I wanted to read more.*" Easy books were noted as motivating by 6% of students and being tied to a movie or series by 10%. One said, "*Books about foreign movie make me fun, and I want to read stories that continue from before them.*" Known authors, pictures in the books, and interesting covers were noted by two students each. One said, "*More pictures makes me want to read more.*" However, one new distinct factor was noted by 7% of the students – having time. One responded simply, "*Having a lot of free time.*" Another noted, "*If the story is interesting or, I've got enough time to read.*" In addition, feeling a sense of improvement or accomplishment was noted by 6% of students and a desire to improve their English by 8%. One wrote, "*It is feeling of improving my English skill. I want to read English books by fast speed. And I want to understand stories at first time.*"

Meanwhile, one student commented simply, "*I don't want to read more.*" Another 22% commented on some sense of requirement for the class such as passing the MReader quizzes or reaching the reading goals being what motivated them. This comment, "*Anxiety from the probability that I might fail grade of this class*" captures that sentiment at the most extreme. More common were comments like, "*I want to achieve the goal of Mreader.*"

Discussion

Some elements of the actual practice of ER in these courses, e.g., having required reading targets and using comprehension quizzes, do not comply with the principles of extensive reading proposed by Day and Bamford (1998, 2002). While the validity of these principles as prescriptive, defining elements of ER has been an issue for debate, including several articles in two special sections on the topic in Reading in a Foreign Language, 27 (Day & Hudson, 2015; Gilliland & Park, 2015), the student responses collected in this project do support some aspects of these principles.

Variety and Choice (Principles 2 & 3)

The key takeaway is that teachers should provide learners with a variety of materials to choose from, and opportunities to make choices. Learners overall expressed a wide range of personal preferences, and some individual learners described their own interest in a variety of types and levels of texts. One was excited simply by the fact of having numerous choices, and wrote, "*There is a lot of english books in library. I think that I am excited because it is full of variety.*" Some learners also displayed changing tastes over time. Learners need access to a variety of genres, topics, levels, and even publishers.

Ease of Reading (Principle 1)

Another key takeaway is that learners are more likely to read more if the reading is at an appropriate level. While only 6% addressed ease of reading specifically as a factor motivating them to read more, fully one third mentioned it as a reason for liking books and 45% talked about it as a factor in choosing books. Some students also talked about liking to read really easy texts and then sometimes slightly more challenging materials. Clearly, having both easy and slightly challenging materials is also a must.

Purpose and Reward (Principles 5 & 6)

Many learners described such things as learning new and useful information from their reading, escaping into stories, having vicarious experiences and identifying with characters, getting caught up in stories in a book or even a whole series of books, being made to feel happy from the reading, enjoying the accomplishment of reading books in English, and having a sense of skill improvement. For these learners, the best reading is for pleasure and information and appears to have intrinsic value. However, while for many students there was intrinsic motivation to read, many others clearly needed some kind of extrinsic guidance and motivation, as indicated by the approximately 20% of students who mentioned this factor.

Teacher as Guide (Principle 9)

While it is less explicitly supported by the data, the combination of the fact that considerable time was spent early in the course orienting students to extensive reading materials and theory and that a large number of students were able to describe choices related to headwords, word counts, publisher levels, types of texts, and trying to achieve reading volume goals seems to indicate that time dedicated to orienting

students was effective in helping them understand extensive reading practice. However, one other role that may be required is setting the benchmarks related to grading to help motivate some students to read.

Conclusion

While this project indicates support for many of the principles put forward by Day and Bamford (1998, 2002), likewise the data suggest that there is no single right way, no one-size-fits-all style of extensive reading. For all their sometimes shared characteristics, each learner is unique and therefore each combination of learners in each different context will also be unique and in need of its own kind of variety. More descriptive projects will help practitioners discover where and how these variations can succeed and how they can best support all learners, including reluctant readers.

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