A Journey Toward the Purist ER Dimension in Course Design

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While it can be said that Extensive Reading (ER) has become widespread in English classes in Japan, it seems that ER is seldom given a prominent role in most classrooms. It is either one of many activities in a classroom or assigned as homework. This paper will describe the author's attempt to answer Shearon's (2013) call for more focus on extensive reading in ER programs by designing an extensive reading and listening course where primary focus is placed on reading. As part of the course's ongoing development, an end-of-term survey (n=29) was conducted to receive student impressions of the course. While results show that there are still improvements to be made, overall feedback from students was positive.

Recently in Japan, many universities and high schools have begun to implement extensive reading into their classes. However, it appears that more often than not, extensive reading is incorporated in a course as a supplementary activity or as homework, and few, with the exception of the program at SEG (Furukawa, 2008; See Shearon, 2014 for a more detailed description), have attempted to create a class in which extensive reading is the primary activity (See Shearon, 2013). This paper therefore details the author's attempt to establish an extensive reading and listening course that reflects the purist dimension thereby answering Shearon's call for more extensive reading in the classroom while providing one example of how to create such a course for those practitioners interested in starting a purist extensive reading and listening course. This paper will begin by reviewing the principles of extensive reading and listening, and the dimensions of extensive reading followed by an outline of the course itself. It will conclude with a look at students' achievements, their feedback, and proposed future directions of the course.

Principles and Dimensions

According to Day and Bamford (1998, p. 7-8), there are ten guidelines that should be followed when designing an extensive reading course:

1. Students read as much as possible.

2. A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available.

3. Students select what they want to read.

4. The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.

5. Reading is its own reward.

6. Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students.

7. Reading is individual and silent.

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8. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.

9. Teachers orient students to the goals of the program, explain the methodology, keep track of what each student reads, and guide students in getting the most out of the program.

10. The teacher is a role model of a reader for students.

For extensive listening, Waring (2010a) stated the following five principles:

1. Students listen to (or are involved in) massive amounts of text.

2. The text is that which learners can understand reasonably smoothly.

3. There are high levels of comprehension.

4. Students listen without being constrained by pre-set questions or tasks.

5. Students listen at or below their comfortable fluent listening ability.

Recently, Waring and McLean (2015) have called for more discussion on how extensive reading should be defined. In their article, they put forth 'Purist ER', in which students read large amounts without much assessment, and 'Integrated ER', which refers to a type of extensive reading in which students read large amounts, but then have to do some kind of assignment to practice the four skills.

Due to the fact that the author's extensive reading and listening course (hereby ERL) was a required course for first year students, Day and Bamford's fifth principle was difficult to implement since grades had to be assigned. However, the ERL course reflected the remaining nine principles. As

for the extensive listening component, since students were encouraged to listen to the CD with or without the text after they had read a part of their book or after they had finished the whole book, students were not listening at a level lower than their reading level, which is recommended (Waring, 2010b). However, listening occured after the text has been read, so while it was not a perfect situation, students should still have been able to follow rather smoothly what they heard as they were listening to a text that they had just read and understood. Finally, if we consider Waring and McLean's categorization, the author's ERL course would fall in between Purist and Integrated, or what could be classified as a PURIST-Integrated ERL course.

The Course

The first three weeks focused on the syllabus, the definition of extensive reading and listening, students' reading habits, reading level checks, the book selection process, the borrowing schedule, a tutorial on M-Reader and writing book reviews utilizing the learning management system Glexa. After the orientation, students, who were divided into reading level groups, were asked to visit the author's office each week to borrow an in-class reading book and a homework book (see Appendix for a list of books used in the course). Each of the following classes was divided into three parts:

Part 1: Students read silently for about thirty minutes.

Part 2: Students prepared for and participated in a peer interview task in which they were asked to talk about their current books with two partners. Sample questions were as follows:

Q1. What is the genre of the book?

Q2. What's it about?

Q3. Why did you decide to read this book?

Q4. How has the story been so far?

Part 3: Students could choose to a) continue reading their book, b) listen to the CD that accompanied their book, or c) study vocabulary.

If students finished reading early, they could take an online quiz and then write a review of their book. The deadline for finishing a homework book was the beginning of the student's next scheduled borrowing time; for the in-class reading book, it was the beginning of the next class.

Reading Goals

Since students received credit for taking this course, evaluation was necessary. However, in order to keep the primary focus of the course on the acts of reading and listening, students were evaluated on the total number of words read during the semester. Worden (2015) recommended using word averages for setting reading goals. In order to obtain these averages, Worden used all of the books available on M-Reader. However, since the author does not have access to all of the books, word averages of the available books used at each level were calculated. In this course, students were expected to read two books a week for eleven weeks (The first three weeks were for orientation and the fifteenth week was for book recommendations and course feedback.). For Levels 1 to 5, after completing eight books, students could be promoted to the next reading level based on M-Reader's promotion function. For example, for a student who began at Level

2, his or her reading goal was determined as follows:

Step 1: The average number of words for all the books available to the author at Level 2 is 3500 words, so the student should begin the course reading a minimum of 7000 words a week.

Step 2: After four weeks, if the student has passed all the quizzes, he or she is promoted to Level 3. The average number of words at this level is 4000, which means that for the next seven weeks, the student should be reading a minimum of 8000 words per week.

Step 3: The total number of words is calculated with the consideration that the student passes all the quizzes. The maximum number of words in this case is 84,000.

Step 4: This number from step 3 is then rounded down to 80,000 words. All total word counts are rounded down in this way in order to lessen the reading burden.

Step 5: Since 80% or higher is considered an A at this institution, the word goal for a student beginning at Level 2 for the semester was 64,000 words.

As for Levels 6 to 8, students could also be promoted after reading eight books, and were encouraged to read books at the next level. However, due to the already high word counts for these levels, reading goals are calculated using only the starting level's average number of words (See Table 1).

Reading Outcomes

At the end of course, students' reading data were collected from M-Reader. All but four of the thirty-one students achieved their reading goals with two students actually

Table 1. Word Goals and Grades for each Reading Level

Starting level	A	B	C	D	F
Level 1	44,000	38,500	33,000	27,500	27,499
Level 2	64,000	56,000	48,000	40,000	39,999
Level 3	80,000	70,000	60,000	50,000	49,999
Level 4	120,000	105,000	90,000	75,000	74,999
Level 5	140,000	122,500	105,000	87,500	87,499
Level 6	160,000	140,000	120,000	100,000	99,999
Level 7	240,000	210,000	180,000	150,000	149,999
Level 8	320,000	280,000	240,000	200,000	199,999

doubling their word goal. As for reading levels, sixteen students were able to move up two levels; thirteen increased one level; one student did not change levels and one student was able to get promoted three levels. Finally, as can be seen in Table 2, the average number of words read per week at each level was quite high. While more research is needed regarding reading gains, it can be said that this type of course has the potential for positive reading outcomes.

Table 2. Average Number of Words Read/Week by Starting Level

Starting level	Number of students	Number of words
Level 1	11	6,005
Level 2	2	7,805
Level 3	3	10,102
Level 4	6	10,844
Level 5	3	13,967
Level 6	5	19,761
Level 7	1	24,141
Level 8	1	30,765

Course Survey Results and Feedback

In the last class of the course, the author conducted an end-of-term survey (n=29) to investigate students' perceptions of their experiences as well as to learn how the course could be improved. The results of the survey, which utilized a 6-point Likert scale (6 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree), are presented in Table 3.

Overall, the survey suggests that the students felt that their reading had improved and that they were motivated to continue reading after the course had ended.

Table 3. End-of-term Survey Results

Survey Item	Mean
Satisfaction w/ Amount Read	5
Increased Reading Speed	4.6
Increased Ability to Read Longer Passages	4.7
Increased Vocabulary	3.9
Higher Motivation to Continue Reading	4.3
Desire to Read Higher Level Books	4.7
Desire to Borrow Books during Spring Break	4.1

The only item that did not score high was that of students' perception of increased vocabulary. This could be explained by the fact that students were reading at the level most appropriate to them thereby limiting the encounters of new words; it could also be due to the absence of opportunities to practice the new vocabulary since the primary focus was on reading with vocabulary learning being one of many activity choices.

Regarding student feedback, while there was a wide range of comments on various aspects of the course, the majority of them were positive. After translating the comments into English, an informal analysis highlighted four main themes.

Theme 1. Improvement of reading ability

"I could actually feel my English reading ability get better." (Level 5)

This theme was also reflected in the end-of-term survey. By reading two books every week and being able to see firsthand word count increases and level promotions, it can be said that students had the physical evidence to show that they were actually progressing.

Theme 2. Increase in reading motivation

"I want to read a lot of English book if this class is end!!" (Level 3, student's own words)

This theme, too, was present in the end-of-term survey results. While more investigation is required here, it could be argued that this increase in motivation could be based on students' perceived improvements in reading. These improvements could motivate them to continue reading so as not to let their reading levels regress. It

could also be related to their desire to keep up their newly-formed habit of reading.

Theme 3. Appreciation of having control in selection

"It was good to be able to choose books I thought would be good for me." (Level 4)

In this course, book selection is completely up to the students. While the author may recommend books based on their interests, he never chooses any books for students. The only criteria that the author gives to the students for choosing books are the following four questions:

Q1. Can I read this book easily?

Q2. Can I read this book quickly and still understand the story?

Q3. Are there fewer than 5 unknown words on a page?

Q4. Is this book interesting for me?

Students are asked to read a couple of pages and if they can answer Yes to the above questions, then the book should be appropriate for them. In this way, students are encouraged to become more autonomous in their reading.

Theme 4. Appreciation of the class as opportunity

"There is this rare opportunity to read English books." (Level 1)

This last theme was interesting in that it potentially illustrates the importance of offering a scheduled reading time. For those students who are not autonomous readers, it may be challenging for them to become regular readers. Therefore, a scheduled weekly reading session enables them

to participate in an activity in which they might not take part if left to themselves.

Future Directions

While feedback from students was primarily positive, like any course in development, there are still areas for improvement.

Book Reviews

The first aspect of the course that requires consideration is the book reviews. After a student has finished reading and taken the quiz, they are asked to write a short message about the book and post it to a forum on Glexa. These book reviews are not part of the evaluation, but students are encouraged to write them so that other classmates may use them as a means of choosing their next books. First of all, not all students uploaded book reviews, and few actually used them to help them choose books. This may have been due to the fact that book reviews were not graded. It may also have been due to the difficulty of accessing Glexa and editing book reviews in the forum, which required students to write their book reviews elsewhere before copying and pasting them to the forum. If book reviews are to be continued in future courses, the author still intends to avoid grading them as this impedes the goal of achieving a Purist ER course. Therefore, it may be better to have students use an SNS with which they are more familiar such as Facebook. The author may also need to check book reviews more often and Facebook may be a better tool for this since students can get direct notifications and for most students, it is something that they can access more easily via their cell phones.

Book Discussions

As described above, students are asked to discuss their in-class books with two different partners after having read them for about thirty minutes. However, some of the students had books that were very long, so this activity was challenging for them since it was hard to read enough to be able to discuss their books effectively. Therefore, it may be better to have students discuss the books that they have finished reading. If book reviews are kept, the reviews could be used as a preparatory step for the discussions thereby reducing the difficulty of such an activity.

Number of Words

While most students felt satisfied with their reading, which is significant, the author felt that word goals could have been higher. In particular, Level 1 and Level 2 students' word goals could be raised. While these levels are obviously for less proficient readers explaining why word counts are lower, most of the books at these levels have fewer than 1000 words. The author will therefore consider purchasing books at these levels with higher word counts.

Extensive Listening

As explained earlier, students can choose among three activities in the last part of the class. Furthermore, if they choose to listen to the CD that accompanies the book, they have a further choice of listening while reading, only listening, or shadowing. While more concrete data is required, from the author's informal in-class observations, often students who had finished their book entirely chose to listen, but shadowing was hardly, if ever, practiced. Furthermore, it appeared that many students did not listen to the CD at home as illustrated by the following student feedback:

> *…it was quite hard to finish my book in class, so when I had two books to read at home, I was busy, so it took all my effort*

just to finish the quizzes. Because of that, I hardly listened to the CD.

While lack of time, or lack of planning as it could be argued, in one's reading may have prevented students from listening, other possible reasons for lack of listening could be students not having access to a CD player, and perhaps even more importantly, the fact that listening was only encouraged and not required. Since grades depended on number of words read, students may have felt less inclined to make the time to listen the CD once the book was read although listening could have been review of the content that could have helped them with their understanding before taking the required quiz. In future classes, therefore, the author will consider making listening a required activity in the classroom while offering support in terms of planning one's reading. However, since evaluation is based on the number of words read, more consideration will be necessary regarding how to evaluate listening.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined an example of how an Integrated-Purist ERL course has been implemented. On the whole, students appreciated the opportunity to build their reading skills while maintaining a high level of control in their reading practice. As explained in the previous section, there are yet several issues to be worked out, and undoubtedly, there will be new areas of improvement as the development of the course progresses. At the author's present institution, teachers currently enjoy considerable autonomy in terms of how to run a class thereby allowing this opportunity to explore the purist dimension of extensive reading. However, teachers at other universities may not be able to implement such

a purist approach, and there may be some who may not desire to do so, which is completely fine since there are many forms of extensive reading. Nevertheless, if teachers are interested in such a course, it is hoped that this paper will have provided an initial guide for their own journey toward the purist dimension.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix

Available Books for each Reading Level

Level	Book Series	Series Level
Level 1	Macmillan Readers	Starter
	Oxford Bookworms	Starter
	Oxford Dominoes	Quickstarter
	Penguin Readers	Easystarts
Level 2	Cengage Foundations	Levels 6 and 7
	Cengage Page Turners	Level 2
	Macmillan Readers	Beginner
	Oxford Dominoes	Starter
	Penguin Readers	Level 1
Level 3	Cengage Page Turners	Level 3
	Penguin Readers	Level 2
	Scholastic Readers	Level 1
Level 4	Cengage Page Turners	Levels 4 and 5
	Macmillan Readers	Beginner
	Oxford Bookworms	Stage 1
	Oxford Dominoes	Level 1
	Oxford Read and Discover	Levels 4 and 5
	Scholastic Readers	Level 2
Level 5	Macmillan Readers	Elementary
	Oxford Bookworms	Stage 2
	Oxford Dominoes	Level 2
	Oxford Read and Discover	Level 6
	Penguin Readers	Level 3
Level 6	Oxford Bookworms	Stage 3
	Oxford Dominoes	Level 3
Level 7	Macmillan Readers	Pre-Intermediate
	Oxford Bookworms	Stage 4
	Penguin Readers	Level 4
Level 8	Macmillan Readers	Intermediate
	Oxford Bookworms	Stage 5
	Penguin Readers	Level 5