



Implementing Sustained Silent Reading in a Japanese School Library for Second-Year Junior High School English

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This article is designed for current and future extensive reading (ER) practitioners in secondary school settings. It reports how the English department and the librarians in a Japanese junior high school collaborated to design and conduct sustained silent reading (SSR) for second-year English classes, and reflects on how they dealt with potential worries or challenges and how their beliefs toward SSR changed throughout the process. To establish a structured SSR program, the English department decided to work with the library and divided a weekly 50-minute English class, which had been initially designed explicitly for intensive reading (IR), into two segments per term: the IR part in the classroom and the SSR part in the library. Teacher and librarian interviews revealed that student engagement toward SSR went beyond their expectations, but challenges on providing feedback, measuring the effects of SSR and going a step further from SSR remains to be addressed.

Having taught reading intensively to Japanese secondary school students for nearly 15 years, I have noticed that they seemed to be: 1) very reliant on Japanese, translating every word and sentence into Japanese; 2) very reliant on their dictionary, which made it difficult to conduct a reading activity without it; and thus 3) very focused on completing a Japanese translation of every text they read, which became a time-consuming task and a heavy burden for them to complete (Takase, 2010). In such situations, many students were not able to gain much input from reading, and could not engage with the content nor express their feelings toward it (Harmer, 2007). They were reluctant to engage in post-reading activities such as summarizing, analyzing, evaluating and critiquing what they had read. Rather, they preferred vocabulary,

grammar or translation exercises which matched their reading strategies.

In order to increase input from reading and have students experience the joy of reading (Harmer, 2013), some English teachers at our school had previously tried to introduce extensive reading (ER) to our curriculum. As the English department does not have the budget to buy English books for all students, some year groups had bought the same assigned books for all students through supplementary teaching material fees, and some year groups additionally had students buy English books of their own choice, or borrow them from the small collection of books from the English department. A number of different books had been bought for other year groups through supplementary teaching material fees, and shared within the year group.

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However, conducting ER was not easy. These introductions mostly started after students had gotten accustomed to intensive reading (IR), which seems to have

made it difficult for them to utilize other strategies for reading English. In addition, these tasks had to be completed outside the classroom, and thus teachers were not able to monitor how (or if) students read the books. When borrowing books from the English department, it was difficult to manually keep track of every book. When sharing books within the year group, books eventually had to be given back to the students in some way without losing or damaging them. As a result of these difficulties, the introduction of ER was not able to be agreed upon within the department for a long time.

On the other hand, we have found, through our school survey, that about half of our students hardly read any books (whether in Japanese or in English) in their daily lives, and that we needed to provide students with more opportunities to experience the joy of reading. This situation led the English department to reconsider the introduction of ER from an earlier age and monitor students' reading so that we could help students get used to ER and enjoy its benefits. It was also inevitable that we come up with an idea on how to keep books without losing them.

In this article, I will introduce how the English department worked with the library to establish and conduct a structured ER program for all second-year junior high school students (approximately 260 students) from six different classes, using books bought through the library budget and managed through the computerized library system. I will then describe why and how Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) in the school library was chosen and conducted. Lastly, I will reflect on it through interviews with teachers and librarians (see Appendix for questions) and see how their beliefs toward SSR changed during the process.

These interviews were conducted once with each individual toward the end of the school year, and were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated by the author.

Setting up SSR

English Department Meeting

We referred to Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) to recheck and share the benefits of ER within the department. They state that ER:

- improves comprehension skills;
- develops automaticity;
- enhances background knowledge (schemata, both content and formal);
- builds linguistic knowledge (i.e., linguistic schemata);
- improves production skills (speaking and especially writing);
- promotes confidence and motivation.

(p. 211)

We then entered the discussion of a) how to implement ER, b) how to evaluate it, and c) how to deal with potential difficulties, in order to create a foundation for a sustainable ER program which could be conducted by all teachers in the department.

How to Implement ER

Although many teachers wanted to conduct ER programs, we were not sure how to do it. Thus, we had to come up with a plan and make it agreeable and feasible for all members in the department. The first question was in which class to implement ER. There are three types of English lessons for second-year junior high school

students at this school. English Integrated, which meets four times a week, covers all four skills of English, and mainly introduces and practices new grammar in the national junior high school curriculum. English Reading Skills, which meets once a week, focuses on the skill of IR, such as introducing how to use the dictionary, how to scan, skim and read texts for detail, and how to translate difficult English sentences into Japanese. English Conversation, which also meets once a week, is taught by a non-Japanese teacher and introduces various speaking strategies to sustain conversation. Each lesson is 50 minutes long.

As can be inferred from the name of the lesson, we decided to implement ER into the English Reading Skills lessons. The next question was where we wanted the students to read books: during class or outside class. Here, we decided to implement SSR, where students are given a specific amount of time to freely read a book of their own choice during class (Garan & DeVogd, 2008). SSR is a suitable way for beginner learners, as a) learners can be allocated a specific amount of reading time in class, b) teachers can monitor students on what and how they read and help students understand and enjoy what is expected from ER, and c) concentration can be fostered through an atmosphere where all classmates are focusing on reading (Takase, 2010). Through this process, we wanted each student to learn to choose what books are suitable for their level and obtain the habit of reading independently.

However, as we needed to allocate normal class time that had been used for IR, we had to decide how much time could be spent on ER. Some teachers suggested abolishing IR and exclusively conducting ER lessons to maximize the potential of ER. However, another group of teachers insisted on

spending half of each term on IR and the other half on ER, so that students would have the opportunity to experience both styles of reading. Other teachers also made the same suggestion from the worries that students might not be engaged with ER for the whole school year, and thus keeping the IR phase for half of each term would be a safe option to start with. There were no teachers who suggested doing both ER and IR in the same class, as it was considered to blur the lesson's focus.

This was a difficult decision to make because no one was sure if this new project would work. We eventually decided to start small by spending the first half of each term until the mid-term exam on IR, and the latter half until the end-of-term exam on ER. Thus, each class was able to spend approximately 15 ER classes and read roughly 30 to 40 books (depending on the length) through the school year. The next question was where to conduct SSR: in the library or in the classroom. We agreed to use the study area in the library, as we wanted to overcome the difficulty of keeping books by utilizing a computerized library system. This led us to the meeting with the librarians of our school.

Meeting with Librarians

We were fortunate that the two librarians at our school were enthusiastic about working together with us and preparing the library for this project:

It will be great if ER in the library can make it easier for students to come and use the library besides normal lessons (Librarian A).

We consider our roles to be designing a layout where teachers can comfortably conduct lessons and students can easily

pick a book of their own choice, as well as preparing and keeping books (Librarian A).

Being able to collaborate with teachers in regular lessons is very meaningful for a library to exist inside a school (Librarian B).

In addition, there happened to be a large amount of unused library budget which could be allocated for buying more graded readers. This was very helpful for us, as although the library had about 1,230 English books, it seemed to be short of easy books for beginner readers because most of them seemed to be senior high school level. Thus, we decided to call some booksellers and ask them to help us enrich the school library with graded readers suitable for second-year junior high school readers.

Meeting with Booksellers

We asked some booksellers to come to our school and provide us with some advice on what kind of books to add. An important piece of advice we received was to start with easy books, so that readers can not only be repeatedly exposed to basic vocabulary and phrases and foster automatic processing, but also gain confidence and become enthusiastic in developing the habit of reading English books (Takase, 2010). Some teachers were worried that students might find these books too childish to read, but as we knew that the library lacked easy books, we eventually decided to follow their advice and see how it would go. We bought about 270 books, and also got about 200 used books from students, teachers and graduates for free. In total, we had approximately 1,700 books in total to start the project with.

How to Evaluate ER

Now that we had allocated time and space for reading and acquired books, our

last step was to decide how to evaluate students' ER. We faced a dilemma: The original aim of ER is to enable students to read a large amount of books and experience the joy of reading, but it is necessary to grade it in some way as long as it is implemented in regular classes (Takase, 2010). In addition, we needed to find a way so that weaker students would not be pressured to read books beyond their own level and stronger students would not be reluctant to challenge themselves (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009). Practically, we had to find a feasible way, because if teachers tried to track every single book that students read and assess their work, it would have been too large of a workload (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009).

Here, we started small again. We decided to allocate just five percent of the end-of-term exam to ER and the other 95 percent to IR (see Table 1). To obtain full marks, students first had to demonstrate that they were concentrating during SSR. In addition, students were to fill in a book report (see Figure 1) of one book they read in each class. This report had four lines to write a Japanese summary and to comment on what they had read. We were expecting that these tasks would be easy enough for almost all students to obtain full marks. Students completed this report in each of the approximately 15 ER classes.

As the focus of the lesson was on ER, we had students self-study the reading textbook to prepare them for the 95-percent IR part. We provided them with handouts of Japanese translations and explanations of vocabulary, grammar and background knowledge to help them study. In addition, we made the exams easy so that they were within the reach of students' self-study ability, and to prevent students from complaining that "I got a bad mark on the IR part because we only did ER in class."

Table 1. Allotment of IR and ER

	Until the Mid-Term Exam	Until the End-of-Term Exam
In Class	IR	ER
Self-study	N/A	IR
Exam	IR (100%)	IR (95%) ER (5%)

Potential Challenges

In the teacher interviews with the two full-time English teachers in charge of the English reading skills lessons, I asked what they had expected to be challenging in conducting SSR. In addition to the worries of whether students would be engaged with

ER and whether the content of the books would match their age, they both replied that they had been worried about classroom management:

I was not sure if ER would work because we were to simply have students read by themselves in class (Teacher A).

Because we had to depend to a large extent on students' willingness to learn, I was not sure if students would take ER seriously (Teacher B).

In the librarian interviews, it was found that both were worried about their knowledge of English books:

I am not good at English, and I was not sure which book to recommend if a student asked me to do so (Librarian A).

Reading Marathon Date / / Like

Title _____

Summary:

Comment:

Figure 1. A template of a book report which students hand in after each reading class.

I did not know much about English books, and I was worried of not being able to respond to a student asking me "I've read to this level. What shall I do next?" (Librarian B)

I will indicate how we dealt with these potential difficulties in the following section.

Conducting SSR

Preparation before Class

Prior to class, the English teachers and librarians selected about 250 English books at a suitable level for second-year junior high students. Then, looking at the headwords or level written on the book, we divided them into three bookracks prepared in the study area of the library: "Very straightforward to read: Easy", "Suitable for you: Standard" and "Long stories: Challenging" (see Figure 2). This was to help students pick a book that matched their own level, and provide them with an idea of what level we expected average students to be at the time of reading. Preparing together at this stage was important for the teachers and librarians to share an idea on what level and length of books were necessary for the students.



Figure 2. A bookrack from which students chose books to read in class, labelled "Suitable for you: Standard" in Japanese.

Checking Homework

Students came to the study area and sat in groups of five or six. Prior to class, students were assigned homework tasks to read a section of the textbook, answer comprehension questions, look up new words and phrases in the dictionary and translate difficult sentences into Japanese. Thus, in the first 15 minutes of each 50-minute lesson, we distributed handouts and students checked their answers and asked questions if necessary. The teacher occasionally provided a small lecture on difficult parts if necessary.

Choosing and Reading Books

The next 30 minutes were spent on SSR. Students went to the bookracks, picked their book(s), went back to their seats and silently read them. We encouraged students to feel free to pick books from "relatively

easy” or “challenging” and not persist with only “standard.” Students with higher reading proficiency went to the bookshelves outside the study area and chose more difficult books, or brought their own books from home to read. To introduce how to read during ER, we used the three golden rules for ER, proposed in Sakai (2002):

- No dictionaries while reading;
- Skip over difficult parts;
- If the book is too boring or difficult, pick another book.

We were not too strict on the first rule as students were in the process of learning how to use the dictionary. However, we encouraged students to overcome the difficult parts by using pictures or other parts of the book as hints, or asking questions to the teacher, and go choose another book if these strategies did not help their understanding. In order to facilitate students’ choosing and reading of books, the teacher went around to monitor students. This monitoring was an important phase for us to overcome the potential difficulties, as we were able to check whether students were on task and have a chat with them when they seemed to have lost confidence or concentration.

Writing a Book Report and Returning Books

In the last five minutes of the lesson, students worked on the book reports, writing a four-line Japanese summary and comment on what they read. As the report was a large factor for grading ER, most students seemed to take it seriously. After completion, students brought the books back to the bookracks to finish class. We were unfortunately not able to lend books to students, as we did not have enough

books to cover all classes. Thus, even if they did not finish reading, they had to bring it back to the bookracks.

Reflections and Possible Next Steps

In spite of the initial worries toward conducting SSR, both the teachers and librarians were able to have positive impressions of the students’ work:

It seemed that students were reading fluently and feeling confident in reading books provided that they chose an appropriate level for themselves (Teacher A).

I think students were able to obtain the ability of choosing books by themselves, as I found many students taking time in choosing books. Some advanced students were willing to challenge themselves by selecting difficult books (Teacher A).

I think I was able to let the students find that English is not only grammar but also a means to obtain information and knowledge (Teacher A).

They exhibited a positive attitude and willingness to read by themselves, which was way beyond my expectations. I didn’t do much to extract this (Teacher B).

I think they were able to get over the hurdle of reading English (Teacher B).

I found the bookracks crowded with many students choosing books, which made me sure that students were reading (Librarian A).

The students were concentrating more than I expected, perhaps because the lessons’ styles and aims were clearer than other classes using the library (Librarian B).

As such, we had an intuitive impression that SSR started out solidly. From a teachers' view, the students seemed focused on the task of reading, and almost all students filled out the book reports and got a full mark.

However, we also found three points in need of improvement. The first was about feedback:

I was not sure how to provide feedback on what they read. They read books, but that was mostly it (Teacher A).

English reading skills lessons met only once a week, and we were not able to allocate enough time for feedback. Although we provided copies of book reports and tried to share information on interesting books, there was less time for students to share and discuss what they read. Our next step is to find enough time to share the enthusiasm of their peers to heighten the experience of reading (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009).

Here, we are thinking of abolishing the use of book reports as a method of evaluation to assure more time for students to read. Filling in this type of book report not only consumes time but can also be laborious work which may demotivate students from reading (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). Rather, we are thinking of applying the reading sheet proposed in Takase (2010), where students can write in a short amount of time all the following information of the books they read in one line of a table: date, title, name of book series, level, number of words, number of total words read through the ER project, time it took to finish reading, degree of interest and brief comments or summaries. Through this sheet, students can record all the books that they have read, and teachers can understand what the

students have read and apply that information to their teaching.

The next point was about measuring the effects of SSR:

Evaluating what I have done in the classroom is difficult, because I am not sure whether students' reading proficiency improved (Teacher B).

As the total number of words students read throughout the ER program is largely below 300,000 words, which Nishizawa, Yoshioka and Fukuda (2010) explain as a threshold for students to feel comfortable in reading English texts, it can be suggested that we are not yet at the point of measuring changes in their reading proficiency. Here, it may be more relevant to measure quantitatively whether their attitudes toward reading in English improved and see if they are ready to do more reading by themselves.

The last point was about how to go beyond SSR:

We were looking for books which can be read within class, but we need to find a way to encourage students to read for a longer period of time at home (Teacher A).

Toward the end of the school year, some students started to prefer longer books which were beyond what they could read within class. This was perhaps an indication that SSR finished its role and we could have had students go to the next step, to have them buy and read books by themselves outside of class.

Thoughts Going Forward

With a strong desire to increase input through reading and have students consider reading as an enjoyable experience, our

school had been striving to implement ER into the curriculum. However, due to lack of budget, difficulty of keeping books and lack of experience on monitoring students' work, the implementation of ER had not been consistent in the English department. In such a situation, we decided to start small so that we could agree on a feasible way to conduct ER and decrease the worries of whether students would become engaged with ER. Collaborating with the librarians provided alternatives to overcome the challenges, which also led to the added effect of more students coming to the library in their daily school lives. In addition, the advice from expert booksellers contributed to a sound collection of books for beginner extensive readers. Through this preparation, we were able to conduct SSR with a large number of books and a suitable place for keeping them, and found students looking more engaged with SSR than expected.

A point worthy of note is that we are not any kind of "special" school with extra resources available to improve English education. We might have been lucky in that we had the extra library budget to buy the 270 new books. However, we consider that what led us to this stage was the courageous decision to believe in the potential of SSR and give it a try in spite of the challenges we were expecting to face. Now that we have tried, we are at a further stage of being faced with challenges on providing feedback, as well as measuring the effects of SSR and going a step further from SSR. We might have started small, but we are looking forward to improving and widening our ER curriculum.

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Appendix

Interview Questions for Teachers

Before Conducting Extensive Reading

1. What kind of abilities did you want to foster through extensive reading? (e.g., motivation and attitude towards reading / intensive reading / rapid reading / grammar / vocabulary / spelling / listening)

2. Did you have something you were worried about before conducting extensive reading?

While Conducting Extensive Reading

3. What do you think went well?

4. What kind of abilities do you think were fostered (or lack thereof) through extensive reading?

5. Was there anything special you did to make extensive reading work?

6. How did you deal with the things you were worried about before conducting extensive reading?

7. What did not go well (or needs improvement)?

After Conducting Extensive Reading

8. Do you want to continue extensive reading?

9. Do you have something you want to learn about extensive reading?

10. What do you think of the relationship between extensive reading and intensive reading? (e.g., one is better than the other / they supplement each other)

Interview Questions for Librarians

Before Conducting Extensive Reading

1. What did you think about the role of the library in conducting extensive reading?

2. Did you have something you were worried about before conducting extensive reading?

While Conducting Extensive Reading

3. What do you think went well?

4. Was there anything special you did to make extensive reading work?

5. How did you deal with the things you were worried about before conducting extensive reading?

6. What did not go well (or needs improvement)?

After Conducting Extensive Reading

7. Do you want to continue extensive reading?