



# Content and Current Events: The Effectiveness of Magazines in ER

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Students in a second year upper-intermediate (CEFR B2) level reading and writing class at a Japanese marine science university took part in sustained silent reading at the beginning of each class. They were given the choice of reading graded readers from the university's library or Scholastic Mary Glasgow *Current* and *Club* and *Science World* magazines that the instructor brought to class. Analysis of an end of semester survey and book reports indicated the students enjoyed the magazines because the stories were short, the topics were current, colorful photos and illustrations helped them understand difficult vocabulary, and they could read topics of interest to their age group and academic studies. This paper will discuss the usefulness of Mary Glasgow and *Science World* magazines as a means to introduce authentic ER materials and enable students to access trending content related to their age group and interests.

English language instructors at Japanese universities are often required to follow curriculum, syllabi, and textbooks that do not suit student needs and interests. As a result, learning English remains tedious for students because it is difficult to envision real-world applications of the language or make personal connections with it. Adding an extensive reading (ER) component to university English classes is one way that instructors can promote language learning through the use of materials that are more interesting to the students. ER proponents tend to focus on the use of graded readers because of the wide variety of levels, stories, and topics they offer (Day & Bamford, 2012). Other reading materials such as the Scholastic Mary Glasgow series and *Science World* magazines offer an alternative to graded readers. The magazines provide students with access to contemporary content that is interesting and relevant

to the daily life of students in their late teens and early twenties. The magazines are also written using natural language structures, which exposes students to more authentic language input than language textbooks or graded readers. This paper will describe a sustained silent reading (SSR) action research project conducted at a Japanese marine science and technology university. The students were given the option of reading graded readers from the university library, Scholastic Mary Glasgow *Club* and *Current* magazines, or Scholastic *Science World* magazines that the instructor brought to class during SSR time at the beginning of each class. Book reports about the readings were collected throughout the semester and the students were surveyed at the end of the term to get an understanding of how they felt about SSR and reading the magazines.

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## Literature Review

Williams' (1986) first principle of teaching reading, "In the absence of interesting texts,

very little is possible" remains relevant in today's discussions of ER for foreign language learners. ER often utilizes graded readers, which cover a wide variety of levels and topics. Graded readers, like language learning textbooks are developed and arranged into levels based on vocabulary level and grammatical structures. If a university has a large graded reader library, these books appeal to students engaging in ER because they can choose from books covering many fiction and non-fiction topics that are at a level suited to their current English ability. A case can also be made for seeking authentic or near-authentic ER materials for English learners though.

While typical language learning materials are useful to give students access to English, they might be too formulaic, and thus uninteresting to students (Guo, 2012). In fact, authentic or near-authentic materials, which are created to be understood by highly proficient speakers of the target language, have several benefits for language learners. Gilmore (2007), Floris (2008), and Sanchez, Perez and Gomes (2010) explain that using authentic materials in ER motivates students because they feel the materials are relevant to their lives. Authentic or near-authentic materials provide a new atmosphere for language learners as they engage in critical thinking to help them understand the texts and increase their comprehension of new vocabulary as well (Yasrida, Sutarsyah, & Sukirlan, 2017). These materials also increase student interest in reading because they provide exposure to language as it is used in context and students feel a sense of achievement when they finish reading the text (Berardo, 2006). By experiencing language as it is used in real-life, students can gain insights into how vocabulary and structures change depending on context, which helps them produce more natural language on their own.

For ER, the issue remains that materials should be easy to understand and students should be able to read for pleasure and to get general information (Bamford & Day, 2002). This is a primary reason for using graded readers in ER. The author was teaching a compulsory reading and writing class at a Japanese marine science and technology university that was required to follow a general English syllabus and prescribed textbooks that did not suit the students' needs, interests, or English level. With the aim of making English language learning more interesting and relevant to her students' lives, she decided to introduce magazines that provide authentic and near-authentic English into the sustained silent reading time (SSR) at the beginning of each class. Then she studied whether the students preferred reading the magazines, which included timely topics of interest to their age group and content related to their majors and whether the students felt the magazines helped them develop interest in learning English.

## Background

According to Scholastic (n.d.), Mary Glasgow was an educator and school inspector in the United Kingdom. She started her magazine publishing company in 1957 after noticing that high school French textbooks were not interesting to students. The magazines that Mary Glasgow published were designed to introduce contemporary topics to language learners through reading. The Mary Glasgow magazine line, which is now an affiliate of Scholastic Publishing, has evolved into a range of 16 CEFR leveled magazines for English, French, German, and Spanish learners (Scholastic). *Science World* is a non-graded magazine designed for students from sixth to tenth grade in the United States that introduces current science and engineering topics. The Mary Glasgow series and *Science World* include colorful

pictures and charts, discussion topics, and word banks to assist learners with difficult vocabulary. They also have online components for students to self-study and teacher packs with materials that can be used to create lessons that complement the topics introduced in the magazines.

When the author learned about the Scholastic *Mary Glasgow* and *Science World* magazines, she believed they would be a suitable alternative to the usual graded readers her students chose from the university library for SSR time at the beginning of each reading and writing class session. The science magazines introduced content similar to what her students learned in Japanese in their content courses at the university, and the *Mary Glasgow Club* (CEFR B1/B2), *Mary Glasgow Current* (CEFR B2/C1) magazines offered contemporary topics of interest to university age students such as lifestyle, social media, technology, and popular culture. Thus, through reading the magazines, the author believed her students could learn about the interests of similar age people in other countries or English related to science, which would spark interest in learning English.

## The study

The study took place in a second-year English reading and writing course that met for one hundred minutes two times per week during a fifteen-week semester. The students' (N= 18) level was roughly CEFR B2, which generally corresponded with the level of the *Mary Glasgow Club* and *Current* magazines. The course used a syllabus and primary textbooks decided by the university's main campus, but teachers were given the option to use SSR in their course. The author had noticed that in previous semesters the students seemed bored with the reading textbook because it did not suit their English level or interests. In end of

semester surveys, many students also indicated a desire to learn about science and marine topics in English. Thus, the author decided ask for institutional review board (IRB) approval to create an action research project about using the magazines. Then she introduced the Scholastic magazines into the SSR time and studied whether the students liked the option of reading magazines for SSR and if they helped make learning English more interesting.

For the SSR time, the students were allowed to choose a graded reader from the library or the *Science World*, *Club*, and *Team* magazines, which the author brought to class. The author had ordered enough subscriptions to the magazines so that each of the 18 students could read a magazine if they chose to do so. The students did SSR for the first twenty minutes of each one hundred-minute class, and the author noticed that throughout the semester many tended to choose the magazines over graded readers. The students also wrote book reports when they finished a book or a magazine. Over the semester the author collected 95 book reports in which the students summarized the story they read and gave their opinion of it. In the case of the magazines, they were asked to summarize and respond to one story in the magazine they read. At the end of the semester the students were surveyed about their perceptions of reading the magazines and graded readers in general and the use of the SSR time to improve their English skills. The survey included ten Likert-style and multiple-choice questions about their reading preferences and which English skills they felt SSR helped improve, and one open ended question where the students could comment on the SSR time.

## Results

The end of semester survey showed that eight students read mostly or only

magazines, seven sometimes read magazines and sometimes read graded readers, three mostly read books, and no students only read books. In the open-ended survey question, the students tended to reflect on what they liked about the magazines. For example, one student wrote, "The reading time was fun. Magazines were more interesting because they were easy to read and the topics were good [sic]." Another student responded, "The magazines were good for my interests and studies [sic]." In the opinion section of the book reports many students reported positive feelings about the magazines as well. For example, "I think people who are in this college are interested in learning this topic in English. Because we learn about marine creatures in danger in our science classes, too [sic]," or "This magazine is interesting for those who like creatures. I will recommend it to members of my club [sic]."

The students also indicated that the level and way the magazine contents were organized helped them comprehend the text, learn vocabulary, and become more interested in English language learning. Some students noted the charts, pictures, and layout of the stories made them easier to understand. For example, students wrote the following about the *Science World* magazines which are not graded, "The magazine has many pictures on topic. That helps for understanding the topic [sic]," or "I could improve my vocabulary skills by reading magazine because they are easy to guess the meaning [sic]." The pictures, charts, layout, and captions used in magazines help capture interest in the topic. They also promoted the utilization of skills such as skimming and scanning that Bamford and Day (2012) explain is a component of language learning through ER.

Another element that promoted interest in learning English was that the magazines

introduced the Japanese students to the lives of similar aged people in other countries. One student wrote in the survey, "I could learn a lot of useful English by reading topics about teenagers in England and America. It made me interested to learn English because I could see my life is similar to theirs [sic]." Other students wrote, "I could learn more natural English through the magazines [sic]," and "I liked the magazines because I could know about things teenagers in other countries like [sic]." As a result, the students were able to gain an element of intercultural understanding through reading the content provided in the *TEAM* and *CLUB* magazines as well as the language learning benefits. This is similar to Berardo's (2006) findings that authentic materials motivate students because they are versatile, connect to the students' lives, and provide language as it is used in context.

As for skill development, sixteen students perceived the SSR time as useful for improving their reading skills and eleven felt their vocabulary level improved. Their perceptions of SSR as a means to improve their productive English skills were lower though with only four indicating that SSR helped improve their writing, and none felt it helped their spoken English skills. Four students also felt reading *Science World* was helpful for understanding science content in English. Thus, though the magazines were useful for introducing timely, relevant content and developing reading and vocabulary skills, the students did not perceive them to be equally useful for productive skill improvement.

## Discussion

Overall, introducing the Scholastic *Science World* and Mary Glasgow magazines proved a positive experience for the students. They enjoyed learning content and English



vocabulary related to their majors through the short, easy to understand stories in *Science World* as well as learning about and comparing their lives to university-aged people in other countries through the Mary Glasgow magazines. Most of the students always or sometimes read graded readers for SSR time. While the majority of the students liked the magazines, the surveys and book reports also showed that the students enjoyed being able to choose what to read because some students read both magazines and graded readers. Choice is a key element in ER (Bamford & Day, 2002), and providing students with a wide range of choices for SSR promoted interest in reading and learning English. While graded readers provide reading practice based on vocabulary and grammar judged suitable for students at various English levels, the magazines serve as an additional resource for reading materials that also exposes students to English as it is used in more natural settings.

The students appreciated access to new resources for the SSR time, and while Bamford and Day (2002) suggest that less challenging materials boost learner confidence, this action research also showed that the students' confidence increased as a result of understanding more authentic content than is presented in typical graded readers. In reading authentic or near-authentic content in English, students need to utilize a variety of skills to process the information in the magazines. For example, when reading about science or contemporary social topics, both top down and bottom up processing are activated. In top down processing, the students use prior knowledge learned in their L1, context and visual clues, and inferences to discern meaning. In bottom up processing, they scrutinize vocabulary and syntax in order to find meaning of language chunks (Berardo, 2006). In doing this, they activate schemata,

which help them understand the texts and build vocabulary and reading skills necessary to understand the authentic and near-authentic content in the magazines.

## Conclusion

This action research project did not quantitatively investigate the students' ability to acquire vocabulary and improve their reading skills through SSR. It did show that introducing the Mary Glasgow and *Science World* magazines as an additional resource for SSR motivated students to read and helped them perceive reading as beneficial for improving their English reading and vocabulary skills. It can be challenging to motivate English language learners in foreign language contexts where they might not have daily exposure to the target language because textbooks and graded readers tend to teach formulaic language. As a result, learners have difficulty connecting the language to their lives or imagining how the language is used in natural contexts. By introducing reading materials such as the Scholastic Mary Glasgow graded magazines or the non-graded yet age leveled *Science World* magazines, English language students can begin to make connections between their lives and those of other English other speakers. This motivates them because they are introduced to ways that English is used in real life contexts. These kinds of materials also help students develop an understanding of the nuances of the language that might be helpful when communicating in English in non-scripted situations outside of the language classroom.

The author plans to continue researching the usefulness of the Scholastic Mary Glasgow and *Science World* magazines as a means to motivate learners and develop their language skills. She hopes to conduct a mixed methods study at her current

university with two similar level reading classes. The experimental group will use Scholastic magazines and their accompanying online resources for their SSR while the other group will use graded readers from the school library. The researcher will then compare the students' TOEIC test score improvement from pre and post tests to determine which resource proved more useful to their overall reading and vocabulary skill development. She will also survey both groups of students to get a sense of which type of reading material they found engaging and their perceived language acquisition benefits from SSR using graded readers or Scholastic magazines.

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