

Hooked on Reading: Azusa's Journey Up the Extensive Reading Ladder



GREG GAGNON

Toyota Technical Institute

The majority of research in Extensive Reading has been done with students in the secondary and tertiary levels of education; however, very little research has been done with adults. Even less focuses on the progress of language acquisition in adults out of school. This paper looks to study the progress of an adult, female language learner in Japan, named Azusa, who has been out of school for many years, but has continued to study English on her own, and uses Extensive Reading as a part of this learning. The research in this paper also seeks to be a replication study of Yamanaka (2013), who also investigated the language process and progress of an adult female, not in school during her learning journey, and discussed her findings at the ERCW 2, in Seoul. This paper will seek to track how Azusa learned English out of school, why she did so, and what her progress was before and after adopting Extensive Reading principles. It will also discuss her motivations, including how she keeps a photo record of all the graded readers she has used to improve her ability to communicate to others, in both speaking and listening.

Extensive Reading is one of the most effective ways to promote language acquisition and retention, as has been demonstrated by a multiplicity of researchers (some studies relevant to this study are: Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 1989; Reynanda, 2007; Senoo & Yonemoto, 2014; Turkdogan & Sivell, 2016). Attitudes towards Extensive Reading have also been studied by multiple researchers, in order to discern and understand why students want to read more books in their target language. However, very few studies have made a singular ethnography as to why an individual would want to continue reading materials of varying difficulty (Pigada & Schmidt, 2006; Nishino, 2007) or why they would not want to (Ro, 2013). Furthermore, only one

researcher (Yamanaka, 2013) has directly asked an individual who has been out of school for a number of years the circumstances of her desire to continue to read in a foreign language. In this ethnographic case study, another set of interviews was made with a reader of English language books, who also has not been in a formal English language class since leaving university courses.

At the 5th Extensive Reading World Congress, Junko Yamanaka told a compelling story of her subject, Mieko, who, at the age of 64, was an avid reader of Graded Readers, and had substantially increased her vocabulary knowledge, grammar competency, and speaking confidence, which was attributed to Mieko's love of reading. Mieko had at first resisted reading, but when she found that it could be pleasurable to her, her interest grew considerably.

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Yamanaka discussed the ideas of Day and Bamford (1998) on the practice of Extensive Reading, which they state is a both “a lure and a ladder”, where the lure consists of interesting and compelling stories, and the ladder being the steady climb through texts of graded difficulty (p. 96).

Over the course of three years, Mieko had read 92 graded readers, and 14 non-ELT produced works, to read a total of 1,063,252 words in that period. Yamanaka (2013) makes some hypotheses in her study, three of which were considered in this study:

1. Older learners may have more potential than we expect for improving their L2 skills with massive input.
2. ER can probably be understood and practiced by more people outside school settings.
3. Graded Readers can have great effect and power on adult learners.

To test these hypotheses, Azusa (a pseudonym) was asked questions about her own journey up the alluring ladder of Extensive Reading. Azusa is a 40-year-old Japanese female, who works for a university in Nagoya as an accountant. She loves to travel outside of Japan and considers English to be useful as a lingua franca for her trips to Taiwan. She made a trip recently to London, England, where she was very happy to find she was able to communicate with people in that country to her satisfaction. She is an eager participant in many of the English language activities held at the school and will use many of her lunch periods to chat with speakers of English throughout the work week. Her means of self-evaluation for her English level is to take the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), which she recently passed at the

720-point level. She uses an iPhone application, STUDI SUPPLI, to help her study for the TOEIC. She is especially motivated to learn the English language because “I want to communicate with foreign people, know about foreign culture, and get more information.”

Data collection method

To understand how Azusa considered her reading practices, an informal, preliminary interview was first conducted at our workplace. She was asked some questions about her reading practices, and if she would be willing to participate in an interview about her reading practices. She was not comfortable with a face-to-face meeting, but she was receptive to answering a series of written questions via email, and follow-up questions to them, also via email. The questions were based on findings from Yamanaka (2013), and from my own informal chats with Azusa. The researcher has known Azusa for over three years and has had many opportunities to discuss books and reading practices with her. This then became the basis of a series of 11 questions and sub-questions for the first questionnaire. She asked if she could answer in Japanese, as she was not always confident answering some of her ideas in English. As the researcher is learning Japanese, he first wrote a draft of the questions in Japanese and asked a Japanese speaking colleague to help with the grammar and expression for the questions. After receiving the answers, they were read carefully, and then some of these answers were used to create a series of eight follow-up questions. The follow-up questions were created either to ask for clarification of the original questions, or to ask for an extended answer or example. The full set of questions and answers can be found in Appendix 1 and 2.

Azusa's L2 reading journey

Azusa has been an avid reader for many years, and she likes to read books about sewing, which is a hobby of hers, and historical stories, in both English and Japanese. She has stated that she would like to read more in either language, if she had the time. She has a very positive attitude towards reading, finding it to be fun. She likes reading novels as well. When she was asked if she reads these genres in both English and Japanese, she responded 'yes' to sewing books and historical stories, but 'no' to novels. She has found that many of the dresses she wants to make are explained in English, and that there are more stories about different countries' histories written in English. However, she prefers to read novels in Japanese. She does not read books translated from English to Japanese. She says she had a basic education of English up to the university level and stopped there for a time. However, she was inspired to communicate with English-speaking exchange students from Taiwan, and as she has made many friends with them, she wanted to keep in contact with them. She also loves to travel, and she says learning English helps her communicate with people outside of Japan. She has ample access to graded readers through the university's English center, and when the author introduced her to these holdings, she began to use them regularly; one book every two weeks, on average.

Comparing data to Yamanaka

This study collected data via a questionnaire which surveyed the participant's reading practices and how they affected her attitude toward language learning, as well as what she did to increase her language skills. The data collected can be compared to data reported on by Yamanaka (2013), and this study gives positive affirmation to

three of the five hypotheses presented by Yamanaka.

Hypothesis: Older learners may have more potential than we expect for improving their L2 skills with massive input

The two subjects share some similarities, and one of them is that they are well beyond the traditional age for university students. While Mieko is much older than Azusa, they do share the characteristic of having intrinsic motivation to read foreign language books, and outside of an academic setting. Mieko started as a low motivated reader, but after finding books she liked to read, and finding that she could understand these books, she started to read considerably more. She read more, gained better comprehension of vocabulary and grammar, and became more confident in reading English. Mieko also says that she can make more foreign friends, because her communication skills became smoother, and she started to chat online with many people in different countries.

In a similar way, Azusa also felt positive effects from doing Extensive Reading. When asked: *Do you feel reading English books has improved your English? If so, how so?*, she answered this way: "I do not feel that I have improved quickly, but the more I read, the less resistance I have to [reading] English. This is a similar finding to Yamashita (2007), who talks about L1 to L2 reading transfer, and how anxiety reduces as one approaches parity on L1 and L2 reading ability. Azusa answered the question: *Do you enjoy reading English books?* with this answer: "Reading English books is fun. As for it being fun, I mean to say that reading sentences written by people from different cultures are a way you can feel the difference from Japanese thinking every time you read it (which includes differences in grammar and words)." Finally, Azusa noted

“It became possible to exchange English with foreign friends. It became possible to be able to convey what I thought.” Mellard, Patterson, and Prewett (2007) discuss this idea in more detail in their research, which talks about how adults make decisions about their books. They found that adults make their book choices for many reasons. Some of these are related to their education level, and how frequently they read books, but their level of education is not always the main factor. Mieko was not at all restricted by not having a tertiary level of education. In a similar way, Azusa has chosen her books due to personal interest, and reads books of many levels. She also feels more confident with her speaking skills, and believes that her listening skills have also improved, because she knows more vocabulary from reading than before.

Hypothesis: ER can probably be understood and practiced by more people outside school settings

Both responders have been out of the Japanese school setting, at any level, for many, many years. Nevertheless, both women found that by reading more books, that they were able to improve their language skills considerably. Mieko was able to pass the STEP Test, 2nd Grade. The STEP Test, also known as Eiken, is an English test, given to learners of the English language in Japan, and is recognized by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MIXI) as an official means of gauging proficiency in English (Eiken Tests: Overview of Eiken tests, n.d.). She was able to do this after reading over 1,000,000 words, in a period of three years. The 2nd Grade is equivalent to the CEFR B1 level at the lowest threshold, and B2 at the highest. Azusa, in comparison, began reading a combination of Graded Readers and books for the general reading public three years ago, and has

been studying for the TOEIC in that period as well, reaching a level of 720. This is also considered to be the CEFR B1 level, and she did so in approximately the same length of time.

Hypothesis: Graded Readers can have great effect and power on adult learners

Yamanaka (2013) reports the power that Extensive reading had on Mieko. Mieko read 119 books, with 14 books being Young Adult literature, three e-books, and the remainder being Graded Readers. She became an advocate of reading herself, creating a reading saloon in her hairdressing shop, often encouraging her clients to borrow and read the books in the shop. Azusa has also been powerfully affected by the graded readers she has borrowed from the English center. In the last year, she has reported that she has read 22 graded readers, with a word count of approximately 110,000 words. A good example of how Azusa has been affected by her extensive reading is her preparation for a visit to London. To this end, she borrowed several books about London city, and of stories set in England so as to familiarize herself with English life and culture. She has also attempted to read the authentic versions of Sherlock Holmes, challenging herself to read the works, slowly and carefully. Another example is reporting that while the reading section of the TOEIC tests she takes is challenging, she has greater and greater comfort level in reading them, the more she reads general works in English.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

When asked to give an example of a positive experience of using English, Azusa responded: “There is less resistance to English and more information is available

from overseas sites. The amount of information obtained has increased in each level." She then noted that she can get a different perspective on world events from different news websites, and she can compare this with the way the Japanese press reports the news. She also feels powerful, because she can buy goods from companies outside of Japan, using their websites. She is also very happy to be able to make plans for her trips abroad, using the English pages of websites.

This research has been intended to be an ethnographic study of the reading habits of a student of the English language, who has been out of school for some time. It is not an exact replication of a study by Yamanaka (2013); nonetheless it follows a very similar path and seeks to test some of the conclusions / hypotheses Yamanaka makes. From this research, it is believed that two conclusions may be reached:

1. The ER experiences of Mieko and Azusa have many commonalities, even though the life experiences of both women vary over time and space. The three hypotheses can be said to be confirmed by this research;
2. EFL / ESL programs for adult learners should not be hesitant to introduce ER practices into their curriculums, and Young Adult (YA) novels do have an appeal to students who are beyond their adolescence. The range and scope of ER includes, but is not limited to, Graded Readers.

Concerning the first conclusion, we can note that while Azusa and Mieko have had different life-experiences, and are not similar in age, they do share a commonality in noticing that their reading practices have improved their abilities to communicate and gather information from sources

outside their native language. The data suggests that readers of all ages can benefit from extensive readings, and that language instructors of adult learners who have left the educational system do benefit from the practice of extensive reading. Even more research on students who have left the educational system is warranted.

Concerning the second conclusion, extensive reading practitioners should note that Graded Readers, while useful and plentiful, are not the only path that readers want to take. Adult readers, in particular, may enjoy the challenge of books written for native-speaker audiences, and that Young Adult readers may be a bridge between the top-level Graded Readers and books written for the English-reading general population. The data collected from the participants of both studies suggest that Young Adult books are sufficiently interesting as stories, so as to be considered as part of the reading repertoire of any language learner.

Recommendations

More ethnographic research is needed, using adults as their subjects, to understand the appeal of ER to that community, and more research should be done to inquire about the transition from Graded Readers to YA novels, even for adult learner groups. More research needs to be done also with particular attention paid to the use of idiomatic functions and cultural references of Young Adult novels.

As a final note, gathered by this research, is a practice by Azusa to record her book reading by taking a photo of each book she has read into her iPhone. She can then reflect on her reading practice and think about what she wants to read in the future. She finds that this diary helps her remember books she has read, as well as books she

may want to read again. She can then go to the book without second-guessing herself as to which book she wants. The diary also fills her with a sense of both accomplishment and pride. It is solid proof to her of how much she has read, what, and in what time frame, as well. She thinks anyone who reads should do this. This practice has affected the researcher as well; enough so that: (a) he has started to do it himself, and (b) he recommends that ER instructors introduce this practice to their students as a way to keep lasting records of their reading achievements.

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Appendices

These questions were asked in written form to the respondent. The first set (Appendix 1) was the initial set, and the second set (Appendix 2) were also written questions, sent to the respondent to clarify or expand upon answers from the first set. All answers are from the respondent, who sometimes answered in English, and sometimes in Japanese. Any translations of answers in the above texts are the author's.

Appendix 1: First set of Questions to Azusa

1. How much do you read each week (English or Japanese)?

a. What kind of books do you read, in general, in Japanese?

Sewing book, historical story, novels

洋裁の本、歴史の本、小説

b. Do you read the same kinds of books in English?

Sewing book-Yes. Because many dresses I want to make are explained by English.

historical story-Yes. Many foreign country's histories are written by English.

Novels-No.

c. Do you read as much as you want to, in English or Japanese?

No.

d. What are some of your favorite books in Japanese?

I don't have SPECIAL favorite book. I like visually beautiful books having many pictures.

とりわけ大好きな本はありません。写真がたくさんあり、視覚的に美しい本が好きです。

e. What are some of your favorite books in English?

とりわけ大好きな本はありません。写真がたくさんあり、視覚的に美しい本が好きです。

f. Do you ever read Japanese translations of an English book, and then the English book?

No.

2. What motivates you to learn English?

I want to communicate with foreign people, know about foreign culture, and get more information.

3. Tell me about a positive experience about using English?

英文に対する抵抗が少なくなり、海外のサイトから得られる情報が増えたこと。得られる情報量が各段に増えたこと。

具体的には…

外国のニュースから、日本発信とは違う視点でニュースが見られるようになった

海外のサイトから通販でモノが買えるようになった

旅行に行く前に海外の施設や機関に質問ができる

外国人の友達と英語でもやり取りができるようになった。

旅行先でスムーズなやり取りができるようになり、思ったことが伝えられるようになった。

4. How do you study for the TOEIC listening section?
- “BBC Learning English (By APP)”-Firstly, I listen to main speech with watching text. Then I listen to same speech repeatedly with doing something (drawing, watching internet, playing game etc...) without reading the text.*
- STUDY SUPPLI(a kind of APP especially for studying TOEIC)*
- To join Lunchtime chatting.*
5. How do you study for the TOEIC reading section?
- STUDY SUPPLI(a kind of APP especially for studying TOEIC)*
6. How did you learn about graded readers?
- Is “graded reader” extensive reading?*
- If the answer is yes-*
7. How do you choose a book to read?
- A number of pages-whether I can finish to read.*
- Title-whether I can be interested in its story.*
- size of letter-whether I can read letters clearly and comfortably.*
8. How many books in English have you read (including Graded Readers)?
- 興味があるジャンルかどうか
- 難易度(読めるレベルかどうか)
- 本の長さ(読み終われる量かどうか)
- 文字の大きさ(目が疲れないサイズかどうか)
9. Do you feel reading English books has improved your English? If so, how?
- すぐに上達した、という実感はありませんが、読めば読むほど英語への抵抗がなくなる気持ちになります。
10. Do you enjoy reading English books? Why do you enjoy them, if you do?
- 英語の本を読むのは楽しいです。なぜ楽しいかというと、違う文化を持った人が書いた文章なので、(文法や言葉の違いなども含めて)読むたびに日本人との考え方の違いを感じることができる。
11. Tell me more about your book photo diary.
- a. How did you think of it?
- 読んだ本を覚えておくため。終わりまで読むモチベーションにするため。次の本を読むモチベーションにするため。
- b. How long have you been doing it?
- 1年くらいです。
- c. How many books are in your diary?
- 6冊
- d. Do recommend everyone keep a book photo diary?
- 読み終わることができない人にはお勧めしたいです。

1. あなたは毎週どれくらい読みますか(英語または日本語)。
 - a. どのような本を日本語で読んでいますか。
 - b. あなたは英語で同じ種類の本を読みますか?
 - c. あなたはあなたが望むだけの英語、日本語で読みますか?
 - d. 好きな日本語の本は何ですか。
 - e. 好きな英語の本は何ですか。
 - f. あなたは英語の本の日本語の翻訳を読んだ後に英語の本を読んだことがありますか。
2. 英語を学ぶ動機は何ですか?
3. 英語を使うことについての良い経験について教えてください。
4. TOEICリスニング部門の勉強はどうですか?
5. TOEICリーディング部門の勉強はどうですか?
6. 段階的読者についてどのように学びましたか。
7. どのようにして読む本を選びますか?
8. 英語で何冊の本を読んだことがありますか (Graded Readersを含む)。
9. 英語の本を読むことで英語が上達したと思いますか。もしそうなら、どうですか?
10. 英語の本を読むのは好きですか?もしそうなら、なぜあなたはそれらを楽しむのですか?
11. あなたの本の写真日記についてもっと教えてください。
 - a. どうやってそれをすると思いましたが?
 - b. どのくらいそれをやっていますか?
 - c. あなたの日記には何冊の本がありますか?
 - d. 誰もが本の写真日記をつけておくことを勧めますか?

Appendix 2: Follow-Up Questions for Azusa

1. You answered that you do not read as much as you want to. How much would you like to read in one week, if it were possible?
2. You answered that you like to read historical novels in English. Can you give some examples of them, please?
3. You answered that you don't love any books especially.
 - a. When you choose a book to read for pleasure, what factors do you think about?
 - b. When you think about non-sewing books, what factors do you think about when choosing a book to read?
4. You answered that you like to get more information, when you communicate in English.
 - a. What kinds of information do you like to learn about?
 - b. Who do you talk to learn this information?
 - c. Do you ever read another book to find this information?
5. You answered that one positive experience you had was understanding foreign news in a new point of view. Do you prefer to watch news on television or youtube, or to read it in a newspaper or other written source?
6. You answered that one positive experience you had was talking to foreign friends. What countries do your friends come from?
7. You answered that you feel that you did not improve quickly in your English with reading, but you did have less resistance.
 - a. How long ago did you start reading? How long before you felt more comfortable reading in English?
 - b. Could you give an example of this?
8. You answered that you read Graded Readers.
 - a. When did you start to read them?
 - b. How did you learn about them?
 - c. What factors makes you choose to read one of them?

1. あなたはあなたが望むほど多くは読んでいないと答えました。可能であれば、1週間にいくら読みますか。

一冊くらい

2. 歴史小説を英語で読むのが好きだと答えました。いくつか例を挙げてください。

アーサー王物語、平家物語

3. あなたはあなたが特に本を特に好きではないと答えました。

a. あなたが楽しみのために読むために本を選ぶとき、あなたはどんな要因について考えますか？

興味がある内容かどうか、知りたい内容が書いてあるかどうかで本を選びます

b. あなたが非縫製の本について考えるとき、あなたが読むべき本

を選ぶとき、あなたはどんな要因について考えますか？

持ち運べる重さかどうか、読み終わることができる量かどうか

4. 英語でコミュニケーションをとるときには、もっと情報を得たいと答えました。

a. どんな情報を知りたいですか？

正しい文法、不自然ではない英語を話すにはどうすればよいか

b. この情報を学ぶために誰と話しますか。

英語の先生 (Greg先生、Tim先生)

c. あなたはこの情報を見つけるために他の本を読んだことがありますか？

あります。文法の本などを見ることがあります。

5. あなたはあなたが持っていた一つの前向きな経験が新しい見方で外国のニュースを理解することであると答えました。あなたはテレビやユーチューブでニュースを見ることを好みますか、それとも新聞や他の書面で読むことを好みますか？

動画よりも文章で見の方が好きです。ウェブサイト (BBC NEWSなど) で文章を読みます。

6. あなたは、自分が経験した一つの良い経験が外国人の友達と話すことだと答えました。友達はどの国の出身ですか？

アメリカ、台湾

7. あなたは英語を読んでもすぐに上達しなかったと感じますが、抵抗は少ないと答えました。

a. どれくらい前に読み始めましたか。あなたが英語でもっと快適に読むのを感じるようになるまでにどれくらいかかりましたか？

約2年前くらいです。最初は簡単なExtensive Readingの本を読んだので、読むことについては最初から快適でした。

b. 例を挙げていただけますか。

Extensive Readingのレベル1or2→慣れてきたらレベル3or4を読みました。

8. あなたはGraded Readersを読んだと答えました。

a. いつ読み始めましたか。

2年前くらいです。

b. あなたはそれらについてどのように学びましたか？

途中で止まらずに、できるだけ一回で最後まで読むようにしました。途中で止まるとモチベーションが続かない可能性があるからです。読みながら、知らない単語は調べないようにしました。

c. あなたがそれらのうちの1つを読むことを選択させる要因は何ですか？

英語の難しさ、タイトル、内容、長さ (本の厚さ)、本の重さ