



# Semi-structured Interviews on Extensive Reading for Japanese University Students

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In the last three decades, quantitative studies, the most prominent research type in the field, have achieved significant progress in determining the effects and importance of extensive reading (ER). However, qualitative research has its own strengths, primarily its exploratory nature and its usefulness in studying smaller groups, as well as complicated and multifaceted phenomena in detail. The present qualitative study, centering on Japanese university students taking English as a foreign language, evaluates their book choices, motivations for reading, ways to tackle unknown words, and perceived effects of ER on vocabulary. These aspects have not been addressed sufficiently by quantitative research. After a three-month period of ER, 46 students completed free description questionnaires and six students participated in a semi-structured interview. A significant divergence appeared in all evaluated aspects that may stem from students' varying beliefs and preferences. This research highlighted how those beliefs may relate to experiences of ER.

Several studies have verified how extensive reading (ER) may have profound effects on different aspects of English as a second language (ESL) learners. Some of the studied topics have included reading (Lai, 1993; Cho & Krashen, 1994); writing (Hafiz & Tudor, 1990; Lai, 1993); listening (Cho & Krashen, 1994); vocabulary (Depuy & Krashen, 1993; Horst, 2005), and affect (Elley, 1991; Cho & Krashen, 1994). In the past 30 years, Japanese research has also demonstrated how aspects of ER can affect English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, including: reading (Robb & Susser, 1989; Imamura, 2008; Iwahori, 2008; Belglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2011; Huffman, 2014); reading strategies (Imamura, 2007); listening (Suzuki, 1992); vocabulary (Imamura, 2008); grammar (Yoshizawa, Takase, &

Otsuki, 2018); and affect (Robb & Susser, 1989; Takase, 2002; Imamura, 2008). Based on these studies, ER is remarkable for its effect on these factors.

The aforementioned studies typically employed a quantitative research method, in which the results are relatively generalizable to other settings given adequate sampling procedures and sizes, and/or sufficient replications (Brown, 2014). Due to this efficiency, research of such nature has produced a broad scope of important and pertinent information in the field of ER over the last three decades. However, quantitative research tends to focus predominantly on numbers, averages, and distributions of objects, ignoring contexts, and the interrelations of various aspects.

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On the other hand, qualitative research methods can be more exploratory in nature, because qualitative research "tends to approach the research context with the purpose of observing whatever may be

present there, and letting further questions emerge from the context" (Mackey & Gass, 2016, p. 216). As qualitative data represents a wide range of possible types, entirely new data categories can surface as the researcher learns from their interactions with participants. Qualitative research can also be useful for describing complicated and multifaceted phenomena (Brown, 2014), and for studying a small number of people in depth, allowing the researcher to focus on and describe individual cases.

However, fewer researchers have chosen to examine ER through qualitative methods over the last 30 years. ER affects learner factors, such as reading fluency, reading comprehension, reading strategies, and attitudes before and during ERs; levels and categories of chosen books; whether learners consult a dictionary or not while reading books; and where learners read, among others. A qualitative method is suitable for describing the complexities of ER thoroughly and in detail, as it allows for multifaceted and comprehensive understanding.

In this study, qualitative research refers to research that is based on descriptive data and does not make regular use of statistical procedures. Detailed definitions of qualitative research usually include characteristics such as rich description, natural and holistic representation, fewer participants, emic perspectives, cyclical and open-ended processes, and research-generated hypotheses (Mackey & Gass, 2016, pp.216-217). The present research employed a qualitative method, including a free description questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Its aim was to analyze various aspects of ER for Japanese university students; these aspects have not been a focus of ER quantitative analysis.

Day and Bamford (1998) described ten characteristics of successful ER programs. Referencing these characteristics, I defined ER for the purpose of this study as following: ER is to read what they want to read in order to enjoy, to get information, or to understand something, not focusing on understanding the details or grammar of the materials but focusing on understanding the overall meaning.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

The study participants consisted of 46 EFL first-year female students (CEFR A1 to B1 levels) from a university in Japan. These students were taking basic level English classes; their majors were either Early Childhood and Care, or Primary Education. The study was conducted on a class that met weekly for 15 weeks.

### *Procedure*

In the first of the 15 classes, the participants took a reading speed test. Easy texts and questions from the reading sections of the STEP test were used. In Japan, a few million people take this English proficiency test every year. For the purpose of this study, the participants took third grade and pre-second grade tests from the CEFR A1 to A2 levels. They were asked to read two texts and answer ten comprehension questions that were rather easy for the participants; the time they took to read each text was calculated. Only a pre-test was conducted, so that the participants' reading speed prior to the ER period would be recorded. Due to limited course time, a post-test was not given.

After the test, the participants were instructed to freely choose graded readers from the library, and read them outside of

class at their own pace. This continued for approximately three months, during which they were to fill in the reading record sheet, and submit one sheet in class every two weeks. The graded readers were mainly level 1 and 2 books, published by Oxford, Pearson, Macmillan, and Cambridge. Participants were also instructed to choose books that were easy enough for them to enjoy reading without a dictionary. They were told that they would be evaluated by the reading record sheets and the number of words read in total.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> and final class for the term, the researcher explained the general purpose of the study to participants, as well as how data confidentiality would be maintained. Participants gave their consent before engaging in both the questionnaire and the interview. Explanations and consent were conducted in Japanese so that all the students could understand them.

After the explanation, participants were given a free description questionnaire in which they could write in Japanese about anything related to ER, including their experiences during the process, what effects they perceived, and so forth.

The researcher and a teacher, who helped the researcher and had over 20 years of English teaching experience, analyzed the data collected from the sample group to identify underlying categories or subject patterns in the participants' responses. After discussing the potential categories, they agreed upon the following categories for further research in semi-structured interviews: a) the chosen books, b) motivation for reading, c) how participants tackled unknown words, d) ER's effect on participants' vocabulary, e) ER's effect on participants' reading, and f) ER's effect

on attitudes toward English and English learning.

Eight of the participants, who read the most words, were asked to undergo a one-on-one semi-structured interview in a quiet room. Students who had read the most were selected in order to examine the concepts listed above in more depth. Two were not available, which resulted in six total participants. The researcher conducted the interview in Japanese. Each interview took about 30 minutes and was recorded using a voice recorder with participants' consent.

## Results and Discussion

### *Reading Details*

Before the ER period, the participants read easy texts at the rate of 116.7 words per minute (WPM) on average (*Max*: 193.2, *Min*: 73.4, *SD*: 24.7, *N*: 45). On average, the participants read 39,817.8 words in three months (*Max*: 72,500, *Min*: 9,800, *SD*: 15,293.6, *N*: 45).

### *Semi-structured Interview*

Six participants took part in a semi-structured interview, details about each of whom can be seen in Table 1.

### *The Selected Books*

Table 2 summarizes the books chosen by the participants during the ER period, including which levels they chose. At the beginning of the ER, three of the participants chose and read books that were too difficult for them, despite being instructed to choose those easy enough to read without a dictionary. Most participants adjusted their chosen book levels throughout the ER period. The "successful learners" eventually chose the appropriate book levels, although it was

Table 1. Summary of Participants in the Semi-structured Interview

Participants	N of Words Read	N of Books Read	Words per Book	WPM	Remarks
A	64,000	14	4,571.4	105.0	Takes two selective TOEIC courses.
B	67,800	17	3,988.2	110.4	No particular information.
C	72,500	38	1,907.9	119.8	Wants to obtain a junior high English teacher license.
D	49,800	25	1,980.0	122.8	Teaches English to junior high students at a cram school.
E	62,100	20	3,150.0	159.0	No particular information.
F	50,200	20	2,510.0	106.3	Began learning English at the age of eight but was not very good.

Note: The numbers of words and books read are from the submitted record sheets.

initially a difficult process. Therefore, this indicates that directions, before and during an ER duration, should include detailed information on graded reader levels and how to determine appropriate levels according to individual reading comprehension and fluency. Careful steps should be taken to ensure learners do not choose books that are too difficult for their reading level, especially at the beginning of the ER period.

Some participants found it easier to read biographies, while others preferred fiction. Participants B and F, who were slower readers, preferred books containing stories they already knew, as they found it much easier to follow the storyline. This increased their enjoyment of reading. Thus, it would be desirable to recommend that novice learners choose books with stories they are acquainted or familiar with.

### Motivations for Reading

The participants in this study were occupied with their education at the university, were taking several classes a day, and had to work on numerous assignments. As a result, while the six interviewed participants were mostly slow English readers and had the same time constraints, they still read 49,800 to 72,500 words during the study period. In addition, most of the participants recorded positive reading experiences. In their responses, participants used words such as “enjoy” and “like” to characterize their reading experience (Table 3). For example, they indicated that they enjoyed reading “graded readers”, “easy, thin books,” “interesting books,” “biographies,” “books with stories I knew,” and “books with pretty pictures.” This qualitative data highlights again the importance of learners choosing books they enjoy and that match their reading levels. At the same time, it is of great importance for libraries or schools to have a variety of books in different categories and levels so that learners can choose their favorites and appropriate

Table 2. Participants' Book Choices

Participant	Selected Books
A	- Level 2=>1=>2. First book=10,000 words=too difficult=>very easy books=>gradually more difficult books. - <b>Biographies</b> (mainly biographies near the end: "Easier than fiction").
B	- <b>Level 1=&gt;2</b> ("Higher level books were more fun and interesting"). - <b>Stories she already knew</b> , books with known subject matter, love stories, and comic books.
C	- <b>Level 1=&gt;2</b> ("Too difficult for me")=>1 ("The library did not contain enough level 1 books").
D	- Level 3=>1=>2 . - Old tales ("I really enjoyed reading old tales in English") and fiction.
E	- <b>A little difficult</b> ("I did not realize I had chosen difficult books")=> <b>easy books</b> =>Later, "I found the easy books boring"=> <b>a slightly higher difficulty</b> . - Books: thin, interesting, and containing pretty pictures.
F	- Mostly level 1, but sometimes level 2. - <b>Stories she already knew</b> , <b>biographies</b> , and books that are also movies.

Table 3. Participants' Motivations for Reading

Participants	Motivations
A	- Chose <b>easy</b> , thin books, and <b>enjoyed reading biographies</b> (interesting and <b>easy to read</b> ). - Believed it is easier to guess the meanings of unknown words in biographies.
B	- <b>Enjoyed books</b> like the Disney series and comic books. - Initially chose <b>easy readers</b> and later found higher level books more interesting.
C	- <b>Enjoyed graded readers</b> , because she could choose <b>easy books</b> and find few unknown words. - Considered <b>choosing books a fun</b> process. - Enjoyed filling out the reading record sheet.
D	- Highly enjoyed picture books and <b>graded readers</b> . - In graded readers, she liked discovering the newly learned grammar patterns.
E	- Chose <b>thin books</b> that she could finish in a short time. - Enjoyed books with pretty pictures.
F	- Chose books with previously known stories ( <b>easier to read</b> ). - Wanted to improve her English.

levels as readers grow in their English capabilities.

Participant D enjoyed finding the grammar patterns she had previously learned while reading. Her enjoyment was probably related to the fact that she taught English twice a week as a part-time instructor at a cram school for junior high students, and that her lessons focused on grammar. Participant F replied, “I could read many graded readers partly because I wanted to improve my English.” She mentioned that she started to learn English when she was eight years old, but she had not been very good. These factors may be related, in that participant motivation and the way in which learners engage with the ER program can be connected to their lives and profiles.

### Ways to Address Unknown Words

The participants had various means of addressing unknown words (Table 4). Three of the six participants (Participants A, B, and F) looked up all unknown words in the dictionary. Participants A and F inferred the meanings of unknown words before using the dictionary, while Participant B did not. Also, two of them tended to choose long difficult books (Participant A: 4,571.4 words per book; Participant B: 3,988.2 words per book).

On the other hand, Participant C skipped unknown words in Level 1 books but looked up all unknown words in Level 2 books, after inferring their meaning. Participant E sometimes looked up unknown words in the dictionary, and sometimes skipped

Table 4. Ways to Address Unknown Words

Participants	Addressing Unknown Words
A	- <b>Looked up all unknown words</b> in the dictionary after <b>inferring their meaning</b> .
B	- <b>Looked up all unknown words</b> without inferring their meaning. - Wrote the words and their meaning in her notebook, after reviewing the terms in the dictionary, allowing her to <b>remember many unknown words</b> .
C	- Level 1 books: <b>skipped unknown words</b> , using a dictionary only when the thread was lost. - Level 2 books: <b>looked up all unknown words</b> after <b>inferring their meaning</b> .
D	- Rarely looked up unknown words. - Tried to avoid using the dictionary.
E	- Sometimes looked up unknown words and <b>sometimes skipped them</b> . - Generally used the dictionary at home, but less on the train. - Used the dictionary when she supposed that a known word may have another meaning.
F	- <b>Looked up all unknown words</b> in the dictionary after <b>inferring their meanings</b> .

them. She also used the dictionary when she was familiar with a word but thought it might have another meaning. She tended to use the dictionary more often at home, and less on a train. Participant D rarely used the dictionary, since she believed it was preferable to avoid doing so while reading graded readers. This participant usually chose short and easy books (1,980.0 words per book).

As demonstrated, significant divergences appeared in what the participants did when they encountered unknown words. Three participants made it a policy to look up all unknown words, but this is not advantageous since it prevents fluent reading. Additionally, it is possible that whether the participants used a dictionary or not is related to the reading levels of the books they chose. There are two primary possibilities: a) learners that choose difficult books will need to use a dictionary more often, and b) learners who make it a policy to look up all unknown words in the dictionary tend to choose difficult books. However, to explore this further would require quantitative studies with a larger number of participants. From these initial findings, however, it is recommended that learners be instructed to choose books that are appropriate for their reading levels and to not look up all unknown words in a dictionary, which breaks the flow of the reading process.

### *ER's Effect on Participants' Vocabulary*

According to study findings, three out of the six participants made comments indicating that they perceived that ER improved their lexical breadth. Participants also perceived that ER improved their vocabulary in several ways (Table 5). Participant B for example, who chose mainly difficult books, indicated that she could remember quite a few unknown words by looking them up in

the dictionary and writing them down in her notebook. Participant D, who mainly chose easy books, stated that she could remember some unknown words by repeatedly encountering them in easy graded readers. She made it a practice to remember these repeated words. Participant F said that the words she remembered while reading graded readers were ones she previously knew and later forgot (words that were not entirely new and unknown). Two participants perceived that ER had improved their lexical fluency. Participants who mainly read easier books discovered that they could recognize words more quickly than before. Participant E, who was the fastest reader among the participants, discerned that ER improved her lexical depth, as she used the dictionary when she inferred that a word would have another meaning in the book's context.

As established above, participants perceived that ER improved their lexical breadth, fluency, and depth. These results may be related to when the dictionary was used, book levels, and participants' attitudes on vocabulary building. Learners can remember some words by repeatedly encountering them in controlled easy graded readers, but it is not clear whether they can remember entirely new, unknown words just by noticing them numerous times without writing them down. This needs to be researched further through quantitative studies with a larger number of various participants.

As previously mentioned, one participant made it a rule to remember many unknown words in graded readers by consulting the dictionary and writing the words down; according to the participant, she was able to remember many words in this way. On the other hand, another participant could not remember and did not expect to remember

Table 5. ER's effect on Participants' Vocabulary

Participants	ER's Effect on Vocabulary
A	- Forgot new words, despite previously looking up their meaning. - Enjoyed memorizing words by using vocabulary books. - [4,571 words per book]
B	- <b>Remembered many words</b> and looked up all unknown terms. - When struggling with the meanings of re-appearing terms, she improved her memory by writing the words and their meaning in her notebook, which allowed her to <b>remember almost all unknown words</b> . - [3,988 words per book]
C	- Forgot new words found in the graded readers, despite previously looking up their meaning. - [1,908 words per book]
D	- Remembered some words. - Encountered the same words frequently in an easy graded reader. - Recognized words more quickly than before. - [1,980 words per book]
E	- Used the dictionary when supposing a known word could have another meaning. - Remembered the different meanings. - [3,150 words per book]+[The fastest reader among the six participants.]
F	- <b>Remembered some words</b> by reading a graded reader. Stated that she "initially knew these words, but had later forgotten them." - <b>Recognized some words more quickly</b> than before. - [2,510 words per book]

words in graded readers. She instead made it a policy to remember them by making use of her vocabulary books. Therefore, instructors should be aware that each learner has a preference in terms of how they want to or are able to remember words; this can be related to how often they use a dictionary and write down unknown words while reading graded readers.

### Limitations and Conclusion

This research study employed a qualitative approach to reflect on various ER aspects for Japanese university students taking English

as a foreign language. Several limitations can be identified. The sample group was a small number of participants who were analyzed in greater qualitative detail. All participants were 18 or 19-year-old female students majoring in Early Childhood and Care, or Primary Education at the same university. For this reason, it is difficult to claim that the results of this research are generalizable to other settings. Thus, quantitative research needs to be conducted with more participants showing diverse English proficiency levels, genders, ages, majors, and preferences, in order to generate more generalizable results.



However, this study was exploratory in nature and discovered many factors that quantitative studies on ER have not evaluated or uncovered for many years. Even within a small sample group of participants with relatively similar age, gender, university major, and English proficiency, each participant worked with ER in different ways, and had different strategies and attitudes. It is natural that ER's effects are different for each learner. Therefore, ER instructors should understand that each student has their own preferences and means of learning in ER and teachers should take this into account when determining instruction methods conducted before and throughout the ER duration period. If a student's preferences and means of learning are not rational or reasonable, they need to be altered, but if not, they should be respected. Additionally, ER instructors should adapt to emerging findings to help share the many benefits of ER with language learners.

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