

Read More Project: Reading Ability and Motivation Issues



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College-age students and adults who sign up for the Read More Project, a voluntary, extra-curricular class at a private university in Sapporo, Japan, have different expectations and face different problems. This paper presents a study of the problems experienced by the students and the instructor during the Read More Project and describes measures taken to address them. The data from pre- and post-reading speed and comprehension tests show that slow readers and learners with low proficiency in English need to read a certain number of the lowest-level Graded Readers to make a significant impact on their English reading skills. A variety of activities are used during the project to keep students' motivation high, as well as improve reading speed and comprehension, and develop reader autonomy and good reading habits.

Extracurricular English classes attract learners who are already relatively highly motivated, but the participation of quite different types of learners can pose particular difficulties for the instructor. The Read More Project is one such case where students from the university participate alongside adults from the local community. The students often are not very motivated to read, even in their own language, since their main purpose in studying English is to achieve high scores on standardised tests. How can they be motivated to read in English? The adults, on the other hand, have strongly established patterns and beliefs on how to study English. How can they be encouraged to adopt a different approach to learning a foreign language? The goal of the Read More Project is to address these issues by activating awareness in the learners of their own behavior as readers, to show the steps necessary to

develop reader autonomy and a reading habit, and to improve reading speed and comprehension.

Background to the Read More Project

Students' L1 Reading Habits

Since 2007, I have administered an informal questionnaire to all my students, totalling more than 400, including English majors and those from other departments, regarding their L1 reading. The results confirm what I have surmised from frequent informal conversations with students: they never, or hardly ever, read in their native language. Those who answer "sometimes" to the question of how often they read are also added to this group because what students mean by "sometimes," (*"tokidoki"*) is often only one or two books a year (comic books excluded), or reading once a month. Thus, students who answer "sometimes" or "never" made up 80% of all the students questioned. This suggests that the large majority either have not established a

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reading habit in their childhood, or before entering university have limited their reading to texts required for school.

The other factor mentioned on the questionnaire by students was that *kanji*, or Japanese characters, were too difficult, ("*kanji ga muzukashii*"), which in turn was connected to their overall poor performance on entrance examinations and throughout their studying years. In short, the majority of our students dislike reading in general and do not like to read texts that challenge their background knowledge or texts that have many difficult *kanji*. The majority of students have difficulty visualizing situations depicted in texts without pictures. They also cite other reasons for not reading, such as being busy working part-time, or participating in club events, or in sport clubs which are very demanding in terms of time and energy. Some students say they prefer spending time playing video games or reading comic books to reading serious or educational texts.

Adults' L1 Reading Habits

According to the results of the questionnaire, adults who sign up for the Read More Project read often, are generally fond of reading, and have established strong reading habits. They see themselves as belonging to the generation that would read newspapers and books daily and that saw reading as a prerequisite for one's overall development. Reading was a respected activity, even though not everybody had time to engage in it; it was the means by which anyone could educate or amuse themselves. This generation was and is very fluent in *kanji*. For them, reading is a familiar and cherished activity. Being educated with the written word, they can easily imagine scenes depicted in books without illustrations or photographs.

The Influence of Infrequent Reading in L1 on Reading in English

From the informal questionnaires and from my observations of students over the years, I would conclude that those who rarely read in their L1 experience greater difficulty in reading in English than those who read books and newspapers on a daily basis. Infrequent readers lack basic strategies like scanning and skimming a text. They ignore punctuation, translate word for word (observed in class), become confused when more than two characters are introduced, and have difficulty remembering "who is who" in a story, the last two problems mentioned by students.

In our weekly discussions, the large majority of students claim that "just reading," and on top of that "reading easy books," is not as serious a practice as doing exercises for the TOEIC test or other intensive reading and grammar-related exercises. Students who sign up for the Read More Project try to persevere in a setting which seems somewhat unusual to them, i.e., reading books in English for pleasure.

Because these students rarely read for pleasure in their L1, they do not expect to be drawn into books in English, and they treat reading Graded Readers (GRs) as another kind of academic exercise. To appreciate reading for its own sake, in L1 or L2, requires understanding a text without difficulty, having fun while reading because the story appeals to your taste or preference for a certain genre, and acquiring a sense of getting something out of the process, be it new knowledge, insights, or perspectives. So-called false beginners, who have spent years studying but still cannot read fluently, are not easily convinced that ER works. Without understanding what is happening in their brain, how the brain processes and memorizes new vocabulary, what amount

of time and how many books (in this case GRs) are needed to make a change in their reading speed and comprehension, and not being compelled by the need to obtain grades, students are likely to stop reading. If they are not convinced of the necessity of constant reading to achieve the goals they set for themselves, they stop reading after a few attempts because a few attempts do not bring the hoped for improvement in their reading skills, going to the library seems bothersome, and their initial motivation quickly disappears.

In comparison, students who read frequently in their L1 use reading strategies to better advantage while reading in English. They do not ignore punctuation and try to read in chunks of language rather than ponder every single word. Their reading speed is close to 100 wpm with 80% comprehension on average. They also show stronger motivation to read and are not easily discouraged, in contrast to their peers who do not read in their L1 and are quickly disheartened by not seeing immediate results. Students with a higher proficiency in English and who are stronger readers are generally more patient to see results after a considerable passage of time.

The adult group—generally well read, highly motivated, and not inclined to give up easily—read in their L1 on a daily basis, with natural speed and without using a dictionary. The adults in the Read More Project try to read regularly, seem to be strongly motivated, and do not drop out during the semester. Even after one semester ends, they stay for the next semester or continue reading on their own. There is a big difference between their attitude and that of the college-age students, who are likely to stop reading altogether if they do not receive constant encouragement or do not see immediate positive effects.

However, the adults are used to translating a text very thoroughly when reading in their second language. They believe that each English word must have its own equivalent in Japanese, so they tend to translate word by word. They are not good at scanning or skimming, are reluctant to skip unknown words, and do not discriminate between small details and more general meaning in a text. But their love of reading in their native language seems to encompass all reading, no matter what language. Adults recall times when they read children's books in their L1, and how later in their lives they enjoyed reading literature. Their background knowledge is substantial, and the excitement of being at school again helps them to sustain their high levels of motivation.

The Read More Project

The Read More Project was born as an extension of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) in class, for several English courses I was teaching. At the time of writing, this project is in its fifth year. It is conducted outside the English curriculum once a week after classes for 90 minutes in the library. Students are encouraged to join the project with the message that the way to reading fluency is through reading, and that they need to read extensively at their proficiency level in order to increase reading speed while maintaining or increasing comprehension of the text. The number of participants each semester fluctuates between 15 to 20 college-age students plus six to 10 adults. Proficiency levels in both groups range from false beginner to low intermediate. There is no extrinsic "push" in the form of grades, but Report/Comment Cards are available, and written comments are discussed and evaluated when needed. Pre- and post-study questionnaires, reading

speed and comprehension tests, and evaluations are carried out each semester.

At the beginning, students who gathered after classes at the library were given an interview. The large majority did not read anything beyond textbook texts and did not like reading in general. In those interviews I found that students' low motivation to read was related to two main factors: reading above their proficiency level and translating English texts word for word. Students acknowledged the importance of reading for their overall EFL development but were unable to concentrate on longer texts and read at a very slow pace. In other words, they knew that reading is good for them, but other than translating word for word had no tools to do it properly. Some of the students who read Graded Readers in class had a general idea what to do, but students from other departments who were also invited had to have explained to them why they need to read at a lower level.

As the group formed we started to gather weekly at the library for 90 minutes of reading. Students are encouraged to read at least one GR at home every day, and to visualize rather than translate. Students' reading frequency is recorded by the library staff who have agreed to allow students in the Read More Project to borrow an additional five books at one time and to keep track of their borrowing. The list of students who belong to the Project is later checked by me for the frequency and number of books read over one semester.

Reading speed and comprehension tests

Before students started to read on their own, at the beginning of the semester, they are given a reading speed and comprehension test. Three different texts from the approved reading textbooks (Nation & Malarcher, 2017) have been used as the test

materials in the past two years. In this test, students time their own reading of the prescribed text by themselves using the stopwatch on their computer, or I note the time on the blackboard as soon as they raise their hands to indicate they have finished. The texts, which are all at the beginner level, are on average 200-250 words long and include a variety of themes, such as sport, school, music, food, and animals. After finishing reading, students answer five comprehension questions on the back of the test page. The procedure is repeated three times, each time with a different text, to get the average scores. The same test is repeated at the end of semester.

After the average reading speed and comprehension scores are calculated, the students are given the results and each student is individually interviewed for their insights into what factors were responsible for those results. Table 1 shows a sample of students' results in the reading speed and comprehension tests conducted at the beginning and the end of one semester.

These results are similar to those collected each semester from 2013-2017. The large majority of students, upon starting to read GRs read on the 200 headwords/starter level at a very slow pace of about 50 to 60 wpm, are not able to understand the contents fully, and have comprehension of about 50%. Those who read at least 50 books show considerable improvement, and this number is considered a threshold for making a difference in speed and comprehension.

The frequency of at least one GR per day is of the utmost importance to improving reading speed. Students who read the same number of GRs but infrequently, in the past during English classes and now in the Read More Project, did not improve

Table 1. Student Change in Reading Speed and Comprehension in One Semester (a sample)

Adults (A) & Students (S) 2016/17 one semester	No. of GRs per semester	Pre-study Speed (wpm) & Comprehension %	Post-study Speed (wpm) & Comprehension%	Reading Frequency: Regularly or Irregularly
A 1	64	51 wpm 70%	86 wpm 100%	Regularly
A 2	56	50 wpm 90%	94 wpm 100%	Regularly
A 3	57	57 wpm 80%	162 wpm 100%	Regularly
A 4	105	64 wpm 70%	67 wpm 70%	Regularly
S 1	50	56 wpm 60%	91 wpm 80%	Regularly
S 2	62	61 wpm 100%	100 wpm 80%	Regularly
	(next semester) 93	83 wpm 90%	222 wpm 80%	
S 3	50	74 wpm 80%	88 wpm 80%	Irregularly
S 4	30	56 wpm 70%	71 wpm 50%	Irregularly

their scores as much as those who read on a daily basis. The students who find it difficult to read daily, or at least several times a week, fail to establish a reading habit, and thus create the vicious circle of the weak reader, as opposite to the virtuous circle of the good reader, who enjoys reading, reads faster, reads more, and understands better (Nuttall, 1996).

The adult learners read frequently, and the majority of them improved their reading speed and comprehension. However, in one surprising case, the champion reader (Adult 4, Table 1) who read 105 GRs in one semester, remained at the same pace of 60+

wpm with 70% comprehension, as the pre- and post-study tests revealed. Accustomed to translating every word into her L1, she was unable to read without doing so, and the high number of GRs that she read had no effect on her reading speed. Some learners from the adult group who improved their reading speed expressed their joy and redoubled their motivation to continue reading. One learner in his 70s took and passed the Bridge Test (Eiken) second grade on the first attempt, and other learners began to analyze themselves as readers and were able to identify more clearly on what they needed to improve their EFL reading and general English skills.

Motivating Students and Adult EFL Learners

The integrative-instrumental dichotomy of the socio-educational theory (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) presents a framework for understanding motivation and is often discussed (Apple, 2005). Learners with high integrative motivation tend to view learning a foreign language as a key to the world; to travel and make friends with other speakers of a language and to learn about countries and cultures where that language is spoken. Learners with higher instrumental motivation are thought to be much more test and/or career oriented.

However, in the case of the Read More Project, which has only a small number of participants each semester, all of them showing a mix of integrative and instrumental motivation, the focus has not been on theory (which motivation prevails, or whether there is intrinsic or extrinsic motivation at work) or on the research, but on practice and the factors behind students' and adult learners' decision to start reading extensively, on individual expectations and opinions, and for the instructor, on finding out how to be of better assistance to the learners. It was essential to listen to the participants talking about the problems they face while reading, to exchange views and ideas on how to solve them, and to create a sense of community in finding patterns of their behavior as readers of a foreign language.

A workshop and poster presentations held by adult and student groups in one of the Read More Project sessions showed a blend of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations; and it suggested that the variable nature of motivational ups and downs was often separated from the reasoning and the aims articulated verbally by students. Motivation depended on whether students were inclined to, or

in the mood to, continue reading, which in turn depended on many factors not directly connected to the activity itself. It seemed that if students perceived the atmosphere of the group to be "tanoshii" or fun, they were more likely to continue reading. The fact that others also struggled with similar problems – translating word by word, not being able to grasp the general meaning, etc. – consolidated the feeling of a shared experience, the feeling of belonging, and this was more fun than reading itself. The borderline between articulated goals (what students want out of reading) and emotions (what students feel while reading or not reading) was often blurred and not always consciously acknowledged, but when students were asked to verbalize their goals and their feelings, these became shared feedback, consolidating further the goals of the autonomous reader in the making.

To boost student motivation, feedback is of the utmost importance. In 2014, two students who were making progress in reading were asked to showcase their impressions of ER and GRs during the Hokkaido JALT Conference in the form of a poster presentation. They explained their experience in English to teachers and native speakers of English who stopped to see their poster. It was the first such experience for those students and their first public speaking in English. In addition to that event, one of the students talked about the benefits of ER during the university's Autumn Festa, an event organized for high school students as a part of an Open Campus Day. Both experiences helped boost the students' confidence in general, but did not appear to boost motivation to read in English. On the other hand, the students had an opportunity to speak English and talk to foreigners, and because the subject of their presentation was academically challenging, they admitted to achieving a new purpose and to gaining a

new perspective on EFL learning. However, similar events should be staged before any conclusion can be made.

For the past two years, as part of the Read More Project weekly gatherings, we have held a discussion hour on reading strategies, interesting topics, GRs, problems, gains, and so on. This year, instead of free discussions, students were asked to

form small groups of 4 to 6 people and discuss four subjects among themselves: Aims, Motivation, Benefits, and Problems. They then prepared some poster presentations either in English or in Japanese. Two exchange students and one adult chose to speak in English, the rest in Japanese while including some English terms and expressions. The results for both the student and adult groups are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Student Comments about GRs and ER

	Students	Adults
Aims	To read 1 to 2 GRs a day After 100 GRs, to move to the next level To speak naturally To get better scores on the Bridge Test and TOEIC	To be able to have daily conversations To travel To keep mind young and busy To become a voluntary interpreter at events To read faster
Motivation	Wanting to move to a higher level of GRs Enjoying reading books Having fun in seeing differences between one's own culture and that of other countries depicted in books Planning to go abroad as an exchange student	Having fun and making friends Working hard and enjoying a payoff Making mistakes and learning from them
Benefits	Becoming motivated to study English Getting new knowledge Starting to think that studying English is fun Getting to know a new method (ER) to study English	Getting used to English Improving one's vocabulary Reading faster Understand better when spoken to Beginning to speak a little Getting a better grasp of grammar
Problems	Getting bored (not all GRs are interesting) Having problems with memorizing people and places' names	Keeping motivation on the same level Not being satisfied with my reading speed (too slow) Failing to establish everyday reading habit Translating from English to Japanese Having little chance to speak

Conclusion

Not having an ER program in the university curriculum is a great obstacle to reading fluency development, and it makes teaching students who have no reading habit in their L1 an uphill task. Students who sign up for the voluntary Read More Project are eager to see some results as soon as they start reading, but when they realize that they need to read daily, they become disheartened and stop coming before they can see any improvement for themselves. Students come to the Project with established patterns of translating word for word, memorizing words without context, reading texts of a higher level than their proficiency level, cramming for tests, and so on. Reading easy/graded materials over a long period of time does not follow these patterns, so students are not convinced, try only half-heartedly, and stop reading. Some students do stay and persevere for at least one semester, but only a few continue to the next semester. To keep students in the Read More Project, especially those who are not convinced that ER is extremely valuable for their reading skills and overall EFL development and those who prefer reading at home, a variety of mock TOEIC tests, grammatical exercises, and quizzes is made available to them at the weekly library meetings.

Despite these problems, I will continue to search for motivational activities that could persuade students to stay in the project long enough to see their own progress and become fond of reading in the process. Up to now, I have found that additional activities, supplementary materials, feedback

discussions, and presentations prepared and delivered in groups all help provide an exchange of ideas and fill the gap between reading many easy texts and studying from difficult textbooks and taking tests. Poster presentations conducted in groups have proved to be an especially motivation-boosting activity. Having students and adults together in the project, because of their different life experiences, sheds a different light on the problems they all face as EFL learners, so they can learn from and motivate each other. Based on several years of experience and observation, however, only those students who stay in the Read More Project get a chance to see the gradual transformation of their own attitude, actually develop their reading skills, and take the first steps to becoming autonomous readers.

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