# Factors Affecting Gains on the TOEIC Bridge Test: A Case Study

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This paper reports a case study of two non-English-major students enrolled in general English classes in which a 15-minute period of sustained silent reading (SSR) was incorporated, and out-of-class reading was encouraged. Over approximately 10 months, they read a total of more than 300,000 words, which far exceeds the average number of words that Japanese students encounter in English textbooks at junior and senior high schools put together (30,000–50,000 words). However, despite their active engagement in extensive reading, the two participants showed contrasting results on standardized tests. One student improved his TOEIC Bridge score from 154 (April) to 174 (December) and scored 835 on the TOEIC test (December) within a year. The other did not sufficiently improve his TOEIC Bridge scores. The factors that may have affected the difference in results between the students were examined.

A number of studies have suggested that extensive reading (ER, hereinafter) can lead to improvement of L2 learners' vocabulary knowledge, fluency, writing, and reading (see Al-Homoud & Schmitt, 2009; Barber, 2014; Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012; Iwahori, 2008; Robb & Kano, 2013; Tudor & Hafiz, 1989; Yamashita, 2008). These findings suggest that ER is a promising instructional methodology that can lead to improvement of many aspects of English language learning. Following these studies, many ER practitioners have encouraged students to read a large amount of text, believing that the more they read, the better the results. However, it is also true that some students who read a large amount of text do not necessarily see improved English proficiency when evaluated by standardized tests such as the TOEIC and TOEIC Bridge. This paper attempts to explore what factors of the implementation of ER in the EFL classroom bring about variation in results.

## Theoretical Background

This is a retrospective case study, which is a type of longitudinal case study in which all data are collected after the fact (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). Based on Yin's (2014) case study principle, which proposes that a case study benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis, the Engagement Model of Reading Development (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) was employed as a theoretical framework. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) claim that engaged reading is strongly associated with reading achievement, and point out that instructional context, including learning and knowledge goals, real-world interactions, autonomy support, interesting texts, strategy instruction, collaboration, rewards and praise, evaluation, and teacher involvement, fosters reading engagement processes and reading outcomes.

## Participants and Class Contexts

The participants in this study were N and S, two male, first-year students majoring in economics, who joined the researcher's general English classes required for first-year students in 2010 and 2012, respectively. The 90-minute classes met once a week for two semesters (spring and autumn). At the site university, enrollment in general English classes is streamed on the basis of results of the TOEIC Bridge test conducted at the beginning of the spring semester. Based on the Bridge scores, N was assigned to the lowest English proficiency class, while S was in the highest proficiency class. The students engaged in 15 minutes' sustained silent reading per class session and were encouraged to read outside of the class.

Since they enrolled in different academic years, the learning conditions of the participants were not exactly identical; for example, the number and kinds of books available in the library were different. When N enrolled in the class, the easiest ER books available at the university were Penguin Readers Easystarts (approximately Yomiyasusa level (YL) 0.8). On the other hand, when S started his class, the library had a wider range of books, including the Oxford Reading Tree series (ORT hereinafter, YL 0–1.0). Furthermore, the approaches to ER instruction were different since the researcher modified her ER approach for students every year in order to provide better learning conditions.

## Data Collection

Three types of data were collected from observation, reading logs, and semi-structured interviews, in addition to TOEIC Bridge test results in 2010 for N and in 2012 for S. Scores on the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading Placement/Progress Test (EPER PPT) were also obtained from S. Reading logs included date, title, series, YL, word count, reading time, interest level, and a brief comment. The interviews were conducted in Japanese and later translated into English by the researcher.

## Results

### Reading Amount and TOEIC and TOEIC Bridge Scores

From April to January, N read 314,055 words (318 books), whereas S read 357,317 words (390 books). According to Takase (2010), the average number of words that Japanese students encounter in English textbooks in junior and senior high school combined is between 30,000 and 50,000. The number of words that the two participants read over 10 months therefore exceeded the average number of words read by students over six years.

Although both participants read more than 300,000 words, their test scores showed different gains. On the TOEIC Bridge test, N scored 90 in April and 108 in December, while S scored 154 in April and improved his score to 174 in December. Furthermore, N scored 260 on the TOEIC in December, while S scored 630 in June and improved his score to 835 in December. In addition, S scored 53 on the EPER PPT in April and 95 in January. After scoring over 800 on the TOEIC test, S decided to attend university in the US, although initially he was reluctant to study abroad. The following year, S successfully completed a one-year study-abroad program.

### Factors that Brought about Differences

Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) Engagement Model of Reading Development proposes nine elements that can influence reading development; this paper focuses on six

that are strongly suggested in this study – interesting texts, strategy instruction, teacher involvement, rewards and praise, real-world interactions, and evaluation. Each of these is discussed in turn below. In addition, initial proficiency was included as a component of the analysis, since the observations and interviews revealed that it played an important role in the process of ER learning.

Interesting texts in the Engagement Model of Reading Development refer to "works in which the text matches the topic interest and cognitive competency of the reader" (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000, p. 412). In ER instruction, this can be interpreted to mean interesting, simple readers that are suitable for the reading level of each learner. When N took the class, the university library had a limited number of ER books, and the easiest readers available at the library were part of the Penguin Readers Easystarts series. N began by reading *Lucky Break* (YL 0.8, 900 words), one of the easiest ER texts at the time. Although the story in *Lucky Break* is simple, and the book has many pictures, it nevertheless seemed beyond N's English proficiency. In the interview, N revealed that he used reading strategies to comprehend the text rather than engaging in reading per se. N recalled,

> *In the first class, when we were introduced to ER books, I thought I was in big trouble (yabai).... The first book I was given at the library was Lucky Break. I thought it was terrible, but I had some knowledge of how to guess from the context when I read Japanese books. I also looked at the title, cover, and illustrations and tried to predict the content. Even though I was reading English books, I read using my Japanese ability.*

In contrast, by the time S joined the university, the library owned more ER books, including the ORT series. This series is divided into 10 levels of difficulty, with controlled vocabulary and sentence structure across levels. The first book S read was *Go Away, Floppy* (YL 0.1, 27 words). Unlike N, S was able to engage in ER smoothly using these simple stories. S said,

> *I was successful in ER because I started with easier books that I could read. When I joined the university, I was able to read a 500-word book, but it was with effort that I read that length of book. In the class, I felt that the books I was given were too easy. But thanks to the simple, easy stories, it didn't feel like a burden.*

Strategy instruction and teacher involvement entail explicit teaching approaches such as teacher modeling, scaffolding, and coaching. N and S did not receive identical ER instruction, since the researcher modified her teaching approaches every year to reflect the characteristics of the classes and outcomes of past classes. In N's class, sustained silent reading (SSR) was employed, and the researcher only checked students' reading logs while they were reading. Two years later, in S's class, the researcher took a more active role in SSR, implementing the "Round" strategy while students were reading (see Yoshida, 2014). In the Round, much like physicians examine and treat their patients in hospital, instructors carefully observe students; they check their reading habits, diagnose problems, and provide appropriate advice to resolve those problems. Table 1 shows a checklist for use during the Round.

The amount each student read during the semester was incorporated into the student's grades in both N's and S's classes. In N's class, he was required to submit

*Table 1. Checklist for the Round*

|  | YES | NO | Tips/Solution |
|---|---|---|---|
| **For the entire class** | | | |
| Are there any students chatting or whispering with classmates? | YES | NO | At the very beginning of SSR, these problems can occur because students are not used to it. It is imperative for the instructor to wait patiently for students to become accustomed to opening and reading books during SSR. Appropriate verbal attention or a reprimand is recommended. |
| Is the classroom quiet? Is there any noise other than the turning of pages? | YES | NO | |
| Do the students open the books on their desks? | YES | NO | |
| Are the students' eyes out-of-focus? | YES | NO | |
| Do the students actually read the books, not their smartphones? | YES | NO | |
| Are the students restless? | YES | NO | |
| **For the individual student** | | | |
| Does the student possess the reading log in the classroom? | YES | NO | If (NO), ensure that s/he knows to bring the reading log to the next class. Remind the student that the loss of a reading log may impact his/her grades if ER is included in the grade. |
| Does the student keep his/her reading log updated? | YES | NO | If (NO), ask, "Were you busy last week?" If the student is still unfamiliar with how to fill out the reading log, explain the task. |
| Is all information filled out in the reading log? (date, book title, publisher, word count, total word count, difficulty (YL), time, evaluation, comment) | YES | NO | If (NO), remind them that all the information is necessary (to be counted as a part of the grade). |
| Does the student read on a regular basis? (Check dates.) | YES | NO | If (NO), advise the student to set aside one more day for ER. |
| Did the student read the appropriate book level? (Check YL.) | YES | NO | Verify the number of words in the book and the amount of time required. If the student reads at an extremely low or high level, advise him/her on the appropriate level of YL. |
| Did the student read too many books in a single day? (Check dates.) | YES | NO | If (YES), praise the student for completing a substantial amount of reading. As a next step, encourage him/her to read on multiple days. |
| Are the student's comments too simple? (One-word comments such as "fun" or "good" should be avoided.) | YES | NO | If (YES), ask about the content of the book. Advise the student to include at least one "who" did "what" in his/her comments. |
| If the student consistently reads as instructed, praise him/her and encourage further reading (effusively). | | | |

Adapted from Yoshida (2014)

a reading log only once at the end of the semester, while three submission dates were set in S's class, each of which required a specific number of words and books; since students tend to read intensively just before deadlines, setting multiple reading due dates enabled students to manage their reading pace. Furthermore, in S's class, the researcher was actively involved in students' book selection. In the early stages of ER, students tend not to pay much attention to their reading choices, so the researcher carefully selected their books based on the YL and length of the readings and advised students to gradually raise the reading level of the materials.

Figure 1 shows the average length of books N read each month without any book selection advice: it was almost the same, close to 1,000 words, all year. In autumn, although the library had the ORT series, his reading level did not change.

Figure 2 shows the average length of books S read each month. At the early stage, he read short books, with fewer than 500 words, as he had been instructed. Then, he raised the level of difficulty of his reading – in the spring semester, he read books of up to 1,500 words, and in the autumn

semester, they were even longer. In particular, a drastic increase in text length is seen in the last two months of December and January, which supports the importance of instructor involvement and careful control of reading.

Providing appropriate rewards and praise seems an effective strategy to encourage student effort and attention. These rewards and praise can be provided in many forms. In their interviews, both N and S acknowledged that even a few words of feedback given by the researcher during SSR encouraged them to keep reading, especially when they felt blocked. It appears that external rewards can help students boost their motivation for ER, too; for example, the university approves credits when students obtain certain scores on the TOEIC test. Furthermore, when S was a first-year student, a scholarship for a study-abroad program at the university was newly set up, in which up to a million yen was awarded to students who had markedly high scores on the TOEIC test and wished to study at foreign universities. In addition, the Faculty of Economics, to which S belonged, started providing a financial reward for those with TOEIC scores of 700 or more in the form of a grant. S revealed that these
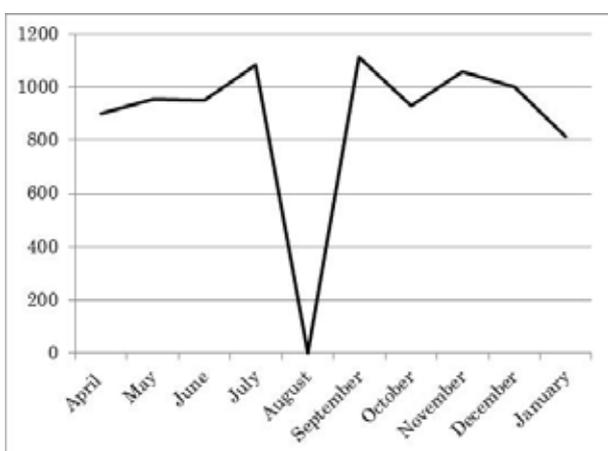


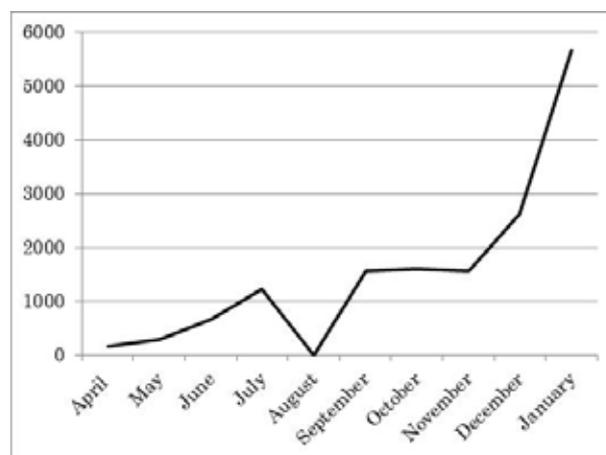*Figure 1. Average length of books N read*



*Figure 2. Average length of books S read*

external rewards played an important role in keeping him reading and improving his English proficiency.

In Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) Engagement Model of Reading Development, real-world interactions refer to learners' personal sensory experiences. In their study, because their participants were children, the experiences included, for example, handling hermit crabs, or observing Monarch larvae metamorphose into butterflies in the school yard. The present researcher expanded this notion and redefined real-world interactions as "evoking intrinsically motivated behaviors," given the participants' ages and interests. In N's class, cases of actual successful ER in past classes were frequently introduced, enabling him to notice that ER could lead to fruitful outcomes. Students were also encouraged to recognize the importance of learning English in the global era. For example, reading a lot can improve their English proficiency and help them enjoy advantages in job interviews. As N recalled, *In the class, the instructor introduced us to some senior students who had improved their English proficiency through ER. I started to think, 'I may make it, too!'*

Additionally, in S's class, intriguing or recent ER research was frequently introduced. These real-world connections helped maintain S's motivation to read, despite the ups and downs over the year.

With regard to evaluation, at this university the TOEIC Bridge test is employed as a placement test and proficiency assessment for first-year students. In addition to reading logs, which accounted for 30% of the grade, a reading-aloud check was used in N's class to examine reading achievement. This was a reading test in which the student was given a new text and asked to read it aloud; then, his/her reading speed

(i.e., how many words were read) was evaluated. In N's post-interview comments, he provided insights on this evaluation method:

> As a check of ER outcomes, reading-aloud evaluation may work for low-proficiency level students like me. But I do not believe it will work for high-proficiency level students, because they can read fluently to some extent before starting ER. It is difficult for them to notice any improvement, so it cannot motivate them to read.

Reflecting N's feedback, instead of reading aloud, in S's class, the students took EPER PPT tests twice a year (pre- and post-tests). The EPER PPT is one of the most frequently used tests in ER studies. By receiving the results of this quantitative evaluation, S was able to clearly recognize his own improvement.

Finally, the Engagement Model of Reading Development does not directly mention a relationship between initial English proficiency and reading development. However, it points out that students who can link their new knowledge to previous experiences are likely to be more highly engaged students. The two participants in this study were in the same faculty, but their English proficiency was very different, as mentioned earlier. English was always N's biggest challenge in school; he avoided taking an English exam as part of his university entrance examination. In contrast, even though English was not S's favorite subject, he prepared for and completed the entrance examination in English as he did for any other exam subject.

In the interviews, both N and S revealed how their previous English knowledge affected their English learning in university. N recalled that when he first saw

*Lucky Break*, the English letters in the book looked like ants. However, because he was concerned about whether he would be able to get the required English credits at the university given his lack of English proficiency, he tried hard to engage in ER, which accounted for 30% of his grade. N said,

> *I had the impression that learning English at university must be very demanding. When I saw the syllabus of the English class, I found out that the final exam accounted for only 30%, while the proportion of the grade that came from presentations and ER was high. I thought I could manage to get credit for this class.*

As for S, he learned of the TOEIC test for the first time when the researcher introduced it in class at the beginning of the spring semester. Although he felt "a wall" at the very beginning between himself and the goal of reading passages of more than 500 words, he hoped to read them well and smoothly. When he was able to read these English passages in chunks, he noticed the effects of ER. As a result, he started preparing for the TOEIC test intensively, using workbooks and e-learning tools available at the university, while still actively reading extensively. S recalled, *"Preparing for the TOEIC test is a good way to motivate ER. If you get better scores on the TOEIC, it can motivate ER. Studying for the TOEIC and ER at the same time works well."*

In S's case, as he had studied English for his entrance exam, he was motivated to start studying for the TOEIC test, and his consequent study of ER and TOEIC produced synergistic effects. On the other hand, N's English proficiency was too low to prepare for the TOEIC test; he had a limited vocabulary and little grammar and was not able to answer the TOEIC questions correctly

even though he was reading Oxford Classic Tales Level 5 such as *Beauty and the Beast* (YL 1.4) by the end of the class. N had no trouble finishing 3,000-word books within 30 minutes, which suggested that he had made steady progress in reading. N said,

> *After ER, I can now quickly understand which answer is required in the questions. For example, when the question sentence includes "which" and "true" or the question emphasizes NOT in the sentence, I can easily guess what to do. But because of my limited English knowledge, it is still hard to obtain good scores…. I can read test questions easily now, though. When I was a high school student, I read like, "THIS-IS-A-PEN," word by word. Now I can read, "This is a pen" in chunks. But as I had little knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, it was hard for this reading ability to lead to the answers.*

## Conclusion

This case study highlights the factors that produced contrasting results on standardized tests for two students despite their active engagement in ER. Although generalization of the results is not the purpose of a case study, the findings of this study suggest that several elements laid out in the Engagement Model of Reading Development – interesting texts, strategy instruction and teacher involvement, rewards and praise, real-world interactions, and evaluation – are all helpful to encourage students' ER-based learning in the classroom. In other words, supplying a range of ER readers is not sufficient; ER instructors should also pay attention to selecting appropriate evaluation methods, stimulating motivation continuously, and providing proper coaching. Furthermore, this study implied that students' initial proficiency plays an important role in their gains on

standardized tests, such as the TOEIC and TOEIC Bridge tests, after ER.

Finally, in terms of practical implications, this case study, which examined how students with different English proficiency levels read and how they developed their English learning through ER, has shown that ER is effective for students of all proficiency levels. The results for N, especially, whose English ability was extremely low, are worth noticing since his reading skills developed slowly but steadily over the course of one year of ER, even though these improvements were not detected on the standardized tests.

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