

How to Practice Extensive Reading in the College Classroom



ONODERA SUSUMU

Hirosaki University

As TOEIC score data (2016) show, the English reading ability of Japanese university and college students has declined recently, especially compared with English listening ability. Though English teaching in the universities has typically emphasized intensive reading, bringing ER (extensive reading) into the classroom can be a highly effective measure to enhance students' reading abilities. In this paper, I propose ways to practice ER with college students on a regular-class basis.

There are two approaches to ER in the classroom: SYOT (Select Your Own Text) and RST (Reading the Same Title). RST is divided into two methods: 'Reading in advance' and 'Reading just in the classroom'. SYOT is an ideal style of ER, while RST is practical in the classroom. Each approach has both advantages and disadvantages. The choice of the approach is based on the teacher and students' reading abilities. If the teacher would like to grant credit for ER to the students, 'Reading in advance' is more favorable because it is a teacher-centered approach.

The forerunner of ER was the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading directed by D. Hill (Hill, 1992 & 1997). Since being established in 1981, his ER method has prevailed around the world, especially in English-speaking countries. In Japan it was introduced by K. Sakai and was adapted as the SSS (Start with Simple Stories) method (Furukawa, 2006). Unfortunately, SSS has not become a major reading method in Japanese schools.

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Background

The teaching of English at Japanese universities has been steadily improving over the past few decades as class sizes have been reduced and a greater emphasis has been put on improving learners' productive skills. This often entails increasing the number of speaking and listening classes, which inversely often results in the reduction of reading classes. The results of external certification examinations such as TOEIC clearly show that the reading scores are lower than listening scores (Figure 1).

This trend is especially remarkable in Japan. Therefore, it is important to critically look at the current teaching methodologies for English education and consider ways not only to improve communicative skills among the learners, but also to improve their reading abilities.

In the past, teaching English at Japanese universities had stressed reading and writing skills. Today, under globalism, Japanese English education has shifted to communication-centered or oral-based learning such as listening and speaking, so most high school students are trained to read a few pages of English at the most to



Figure 1. TOEIC score data in Japan

from http://www.iibc-global.org/toEIC/official_data/lr.html

pass entrance examinations. After entering university, they may read only several pages of English in a class a week. In the classroom, some students make word-for-word translation, so they feel it would be difficult to read an English book in a single sitting.

However, students are required to read various academic papers and books to write graduation theses in English or study abroad. Even after graduation they are obliged to read a lot of English documents and newspapers in a short amount of time in business situations. Nowadays, university curricula are inadequate for developing such practical reading skills. One effective way to develop these skills is through the use of ER in the language classroom. In this paper, I describe how I implemented an English ER program in the college classroom on a regular-class basis, and this may provide some insight for other instructors who are interested in implementing a similar program in their classes.

How to Practice ER

The rules of ER are simple. First, students are not allowed to use a dictionary or to translate the text into their native language. Secondly, they should not stop but read

through the entire book and simply try to enjoy the material. The enjoyment of reading is a key factor for ER. Students should not be forced to do a comprehension exercise based on this reading, but they are to 'just read and have fun!'

As noted above, there are two approaches to ER in the classroom: SYOT and RST. RST has two ways: 'Reading in advance' and 'Reading just in the classroom'.

SYOT involves three steps. Students select what they want to read and then read these books in the classroom (silent reading). The classroom is calm, and a peaceful reading environment is generated there. Students read as many readers as possible and write down the name of the books, the number of words they read and their impressions in their reading records or reading portfolios. The teacher simply observes the students reading in the classroom.

SYOT is an ideal style for students, especially EFL learners. It is closely related to learner autonomy, self-study or self-learning. Students can read their favorite topics and enjoy reading the material. However, in this type of situation the teacher likely will find difficulty in carrying out any evaluation. Moreover, students' reading genres will be limited because they are likely to select only their favorite genres.

'Reading in advance' involves two steps. Each student reads the same GR (graded reader) in advance at home, in the library, or other places outside of the classroom. In the classroom, the teacher plays a central role and urges students to perform reading activities. There are three types of activities: (1) Students summarize the story; (2) The teacher makes original active questions about the reading and students discuss them; (3) Interactive communication

between the teacher and students takes place.

As a matter of fact, the method in which students answer comprehension questions attached to the back pages of GRs would not be favorable. Through personal correspondence, Richard Day (one of the leading proponents of ER) has stated that solving and answering comprehension questions are just regular reading activities, not activities of ER (see Onodera, 2011, p. 53 & 56; Day, 2011, p. 12). It is more important to enjoy the reading within an ER framework. For example, summarizing the story assures the teacher that the students have thoroughly understood the material. After summarizing it, the teacher puts a question to students such as 'Which characters do you like best?' 'What will the hero be doing 20 years after the end of the story?' or other questions that promote creative thinking. These interactive questions aim to get students to communicate more deeply about the materials and create a positive and active class environment. Students can talk actively about the story of the GR because all students read the same GR and the teacher can more easily check and evaluate them. In this scenario, students cannot select their favorite genres. Some students also may feel difficulty with the story of the GR.

'Reading just in the classroom' follows two steps. All students read the same GR in the classroom, with simple silent reading and no discussion. The classroom is calm, and a peaceful reading environment is created there. The teacher just observes students reading in the classroom. After reading, students write down the names of the books, the number of words they read, reading time and their impressions in their reading records or reading portfolios. If students cannot finish reading their books,

they can note the page number they read in the records. The teacher can calculate how many words students read. While students cannot select their favorite, the teacher can easily evaluate their reading ability because he/she controls levels, contents and words of GRs.

The difference between SYOT and RST is that the former is for students, who can select their own GR and enjoy it, and the latter is for teachers, who can make an evaluation and manage GRs easily. The approach a teacher may choose to practice in the classroom depends on the format of the class.

Model Classes

The next issue is investigating the best method for selecting GRs in the same text-reading scenario, so I tried conducting model classes for ER with the help of my third year and fourth year students who were not English majors. I researched how to select GRs that are most suitable for students based on their reading abilities.

The first model class was conducted in 2016. Six students tackled a 10-day ER course. Their English abilities ranged from 520 to 710 based on TOEIC scores. I used the following two GR series: Oxford Bookworms (OB) and Cambridge English Readers (CER). Students started from Stage 1 to Stage 4 of OB and Level 1 to Level 4 of CER. Reading records and questionnaires after GR readings show that all of the students enjoyed reading and had fun.

In the second model class conducted in 2017, 7 students tackled the 10-day challenge of ER. Their English abilities ranged from EIKEN Pre-2 to 710 based on TOEIC scores. They also used the OB and CER as the GR reading material. Students started

Table 1. The Conversion Table of CEFR, Cambridge English, IELTS, TOEFL iBT, TOEIC and EIKEN

CEFR	Cambridge English	IELTS	TOEFL iBT	TOEIC	EIKEN	Level of English
B2	FCE(160-170)	6	60 – 78	740-820	Pre-1	Intermediate
		5.5	46 – 59	600-740		
B1	PET(140-159)	5	35 – 43	550-600	2	Pre-intermediate
		4.5	32 – 34	500-550		
A2	KET(120-139)	3.0	below 32	450-500	Pre-2	Elementary

from http://ieltsnavi.com/score_conversion.html and http://ieltsnavi.com/type_score.html selected and reformatted by the author

from Stage 1 to Stage 5 of OB and Level 1 to Level 4 of CER. Almost all of them enjoyed reading up to Stage 4 and Level 4, but they felt the Stage 5 GR was too difficult, so they could not enjoy it as much as the lower stages.

According to Table 1, my students' English abilities are at Elementary and Pre-intermediate levels. This position is good for them to attain the intermediate level of English. Table 2 shows how several different publishers divide the grades based on an assumed depth of vocabulary knowledge of the readers and it can be seen that the grading of readers is different for each publisher. There are different levels and headword totals. Therefore we may as well rely on the Extensive Reading Foundation Grading Scale (Figure 1) to select GRs. This Grading Scale shows that the intermediate level is between 801 and 1,500. According to the conversion table and the Grading Scale of Table 3, the intermediate level is from 550 to 740 based on TOEIC scores. So, GRs suitable for my students range from Stage 3 to Stage 4 of OB and Level 3 to Level 4 of CER.

How to Select GRs

Using Stages 3 and 4 (or Level 3 and Level 4) GR material, my students felt that they were able to read these books without much effort and rather fluently. The headwords numbered from 1,000 to 1,400. My upper-level students, whose TOEIC scores were 600 to 700, read an average of 143 wpm (words per minute), while my lower-level students, whose TOEIC scores were 500 to 600, read an average of 131 wpm. All of them were able to understand Level 3 and 4 materials well. Most regular classes at universities last 90 minutes. Keeping the reading speed of my students in mind, less than 13,000 words in the class hour seemed to be preferable. In reality, some students who scored over 700 on TOEIC can read 15,000 words in the class hour. A strong correlation seems to exist between the reading speed and TOEIC scores.

As Bowler and Parminter (2011) have pointed out, it is favorable for students to feel that the material is easier to read than too difficult. So I suggest that intermediate class students should start Level 3 GR that have fewer words (around 8,000 words) and finish Level 4 (around 15,000 words). The problem is that the selection of books with less than 13,000 words in Level 4 is

Table 2. Graded Readers (words)

Grade	OB	CER	PR	MER	YL	LM
Starter	Starter 200w	Starter 250w	Easystarts 200w	Level 1 300w	0.8-0.9	260L
Beginner	Stage 1 400w	Level 1 400w	Level 1 300w	Level 2 600w	1.2-2.2	420L
Elementary	Stage 2 700w	Level 2 800w	Level 2 600w	Level 3 1200w	2.2-2.8	480L
Pre-intermediate	Stage 3 1000w		Level 3 1200w	Level 4 1400w	3.2-3.4	720L
Intermediate	Stage 4 1400w	Level 3 1300w	Level 4 1700w	Level 5 1600w	3.6-4.2	760L
Upper-intermediate	Stage 5 1800w	Level 4 1900w	Level 5 2300w	Level 6 2200w	4.0-5.0	820L
Advanced	Stage 6 2000w	Level 5 2800w	Level 6 3000w		5.0-6.0	910L
Advanced		Level 6 3800w			6.0-7.0	1040L

Abbreviations: OB=Oxford Bookworms, CER=Cambridge English Readers, PR=Penguin Readers, MER=Macmillan English Readers, YL=Yomiyasusa Level, LM=Lexile Measures

data from <https://sites.google.com/site/erfgelist/>

limited. PR (Penguin Readers), MER (Macmillan English Readers) and PGR (Pearson Graded Readers) offer such books, while OB and CER do not. In reading GRs just in the classroom, the number of GRs is restricted.

To sum up, for students aiming at the intermediate reading level, SSR and 'Reading just in the classroom' have restrictions on the use of GRs, while 'Reading in advance' has no restrictions because students have

no limitation of reading time at home. So I suggest 'Reading in advance' if you would like to use various GRs in the classroom and grant your students credit.

If students are at the elementary level or the advanced level, one should have to grade down in the case of the elementary level and to grade up in the case of the advanced level. For example, in the elementary level, students start at Level 1 and finish at Level

Beginner				Elementary			Intermediate			Upper Intermediate			Advanced			Bridge			Near Native
Alphabet	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	Early	Mid	High	
1	51	101	201	301	401	601	801	1001	1251	1501	1801	2101	2401	3001	3601	4501	6001	8001	12001-18000 and above
50	100	200	300	400	600	800	1000	1250	1500	1800	2100	2400	3000	3600	4500	6000	8000	12000	

Figure 2. The Extensive Reading Foundation Grading Scale

from <http://erfoundation.org/wordpress/graded-readers/>

2 or start at Level 2 and finish at Level 3, depending on their English abilities. In the advanced level, students start at Level 4 or 5 and finish at Level 6. But they cannot read only in the classroom because they will not have enough time to finish reading. Therefore, for these types of students the only approach is to use the 'Reading in advance' method.

The problem of the RST approach, however, lies in the cost to buy and keep large numbers of copies each of several different readers. In the past, I asked students to buy them at their own expense (Onodera, 2011). Each student needed to spend around \$100 for 14 copies in a semester. If you lessen their financial burden, the use of e-books may be possible and less expensive.

Teachers also offer course credit to students on a regular class basis, so they must carry out an evaluation. As for "How to evaluate ER in the classroom", I am awaiting the next chance to research this topic in greater depth.

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