



Students' Exchange of Extensive Reading Programs in Japan and Vietnam

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This paper introduces a cooperative arrangement between two educational institutions which try to improve students' English skills based on Extensive Reading (ER) programs conducted in each institution. English has been and is a major barrier for engineering students from Asian countries such as Japan and Vietnam, where they have little exposure to the target language outside the classroom. With the aim of breaking through the situation, an ER program has been conducted in a Japanese college of technology and has been successful in improving their language skills. However, the ER program needs a long term to find improvement in student skills. Also, it's not so easy to foster their productive skills, including writing and speaking, within ER classes. The situation is even more challenging in Vietnam since ER is a totally new approach there and demands great effort from both teachers and learners who are often familiar with conventional methods. Therefore, it is an essential task for ER practitioners to substantially motivate the students during the long period of ER programs. The two ER programs in Japan and Vietnam have provided the students with the opportunities for exchange activities based on the common reading materials to make ER more effective. The combination of ER and students' exchange activities is expected to improve their language skills in a more comprehensive way, which might not be achieved by an independent ER program or a single student exchange program.

Extensive Reading (ER) is undoubtedly an effective approach for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in which learners need to read a lot of easy materials in the language to improve their language skills from the cumulated input over the long run (Day & Bamford, 1998). Providing language learners with easy materials to read seems quite convincing for language acquisition; however, there still are obstacles to making it happen in language education. Krashen (2004) mentioned that teachers

assumed that learners first master language skills and then apply those skills to reading and writing. Furukawa (2011) pointed out the preconception, which English teachers believed that learners should start ER at one level below their intensive reading level whereas course books in high schools and universities are generally extremely difficult for students to understand.

In Japan, ER was known as a promising approach when Sakai (2002) proposed that learners should start to read quite easy books with three golden rules for ER (do not use dictionaries, skip the words you do not understand, and stop reading the book when you don't like it). Implementing

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ER according to this method, Nishizawa, Yoshioka and Fukada (2010) reported that their 4-year-long ER program increased students' TOEIC scores at the National Institute of Technology (NIT), Toyota College.

The long-term ER program has been done at the NIT for nearly nine years, combining a three-year program for all the first through third year students and a six-year program starting at the second year of the Electrical and Electronic (E&E) Engineering department, which results in a nine-credited seven-year program for E&E students (Nishizawa, Yoshioka and Ito, 2013). The students are required to read easy English books in their classroom and record their reading histories in their logbooks, which are checked and given some comments from their teachers. The teachers also encourage the students to read outside the classroom to keep their reading flow constant. It has been expected that one student should read an average number of total words ranging from 150 thousand to 300 thousand words per year. Thanks to the long-term program with the resourceful school library, the students can read extensively over several years, and they can read more than a million total words by the end of their fourth year of the ER program, as well as improve their TOEIC scores to 400 or higher (Nishizawa et al, 2013).

Meanwhile, ER was initially practiced at University of Information Technology (UIT) – Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City as an extra-curricular activity, with the aim of enabling ICT (Information and Communications Technology) students to study English outside the classroom. With a lot of difficulties in book resources and school funding, the ER implementation at UIT could only be done officially for all students when it got

tremendous support from the ER program of NIT. As a result, the Joint ER program with NIT has been conducted with 42 first-year students voluntarily taking part in the program within two consecutive academic school years since 2016. The students are required to read many graded readers either on the basis of level of difficulty or to their own interests. Their reading is usually done outside the classroom, and they need to record their reading histories in their journals. Because the ER program cannot be integrated into the compulsory English curriculum, the students are not scored for their amount of reading or journal writing, so they join ER meetings once every two weeks to discuss their reading progress and their favorite books with other members. Their reading journals are also checked and given feedback from the teacher. The average number of total words read by UIT students is much lower than that of NIT students – only 60 thousand to 150 thousand words per year because they are not strictly required to read. They only read in their free time, outside the classroom, with continuous encouragement and reminders from the teacher.

ER is surely a helpful outside-the-classroom approach in learning English as learners can practice their language learning by reading a variety of books at their own convenience. While ER is often practiced as a single course integrated in school programs, it is also suggested that ER should be done as a cooperative program between different institutions to enhance students' interests and enthusiasm for reading and language learning, as well as create a non-threatening environment for students to exchange information with many friends. To make ER more effective for students, the two universities NIT and UIT have cooperated to conduct their Joint ER program for two years.

The two ER programs in Japan and Vietnam have the same aim to motivate the students to read English books extensively, continuously, and honestly to improve their English skills. Through the Joint ER program, the two schools provide the two groups of students with many activities so that they can exchange their learning experience and information to each other, for example: sharing the reading materials, and discussing different topics about their common study and reading interests on Tadoku Forums, an ER forum which is run on the website Tadoku (<http://forum.tadoku.org/>) organized by NPO Tadoku supporters. Particularly, the Student Exchange Program, in which NIT students visited the UIT campus in March 2017, aroused much enthusiasm for ER from both groups of students, and encouraged them to improve their language skills to higher levels beforehand so they could use English as a means of communication more fluently and more accurately within this international context.

Exchange

Participants

The exchange event involved 44 Japanese students (JS) from NIT [42 males and 2 females] and 50 Vietnamese students (VS) from UIT [40 males and 10 females]. The JS belonged to the fourth grade of NIT, where students receive a five-year education majoring in engineering after they graduate from junior high school, and which is unique to Japan. The JS had done ER as an accredited course since 2008. Meanwhile, the VS belonged to the first-year and second-year classes of UIT. The VS were still new to ER, as they had just practiced ER as a voluntary extra-curricular and non-credited activity for over one year. Before the exchange event, most of the students in the two groups had discussed different topics with each other, such as reading

skills, favorite books, Engineering and ICT majors, and cultures, using their pseudonyms on Tadoku Forums. It had been expected prior to the event that because this was the first time that many students in both groups would interact with foreigners and they were not highly proficient in English, they might have felt shy and not confident enough to communicate in English fluently with their foreign friends during exchange activities.

Activities

During the two-day exchange event, there were a variety of both cultural and academic exchange activities for students, including a robot demonstration, a poster session, a book talk (at UIT on the first day), a walk rally, and a dinner at ELISA in Ho Chi Minh City on the second day. Students might have interacted with each other on Tadoku Forums beforehand; however, it was the first time for them to meet in person.

Robot Demonstration

The activity was prepared and initiated by the JS, who brought one originally-made robot and gave several demonstrations to explain the components and functions of the robot (Figure 1). The JS also set up some matches to have more interaction with the VS by inviting them to the stage and dividing them into two teams. Each VS team



Figure 1. Robot demonstration

was given a remote to stop the robot while the JS controlled the robot to run around the stage. The team that could stop the robot first won the game. The robot demonstration was a good “breaking the ice” activity for both groups of students as they were all majoring in technology. What’s more, they all started using English to communicate, and when they realized that they were able to use their limited English to exchange information and explain difficult terms in their major, they felt more encouraged to use English more openly for the next activities.

Poster Session

The aim of the poster session activity was to encourage the students to introduce their cultures to their peers as well as to learn about each other’s cultures. The students were divided into teams of 4 or 5, and each team needed to prepare an A3 sized poster for one theme. Each team had three minutes to present and two minutes for questions and answers (Q&A). The JS and VS took turns to present their posters. In particular, when teams of the JS were presenting their posters, the VS could choose one of the posters, listen to the presentation, have a discussion, and then move to the next poster. The activity aroused much of the students’ interests and enthusiasm since they could learn about new cultures from each other. Besides, the students were more relaxed when presenting the poster because they could use the poster with illustrated pictures and brief descriptions to support their discussion.

Book Talk

The book talk was an ER oral activity in a small group of students. Each group consisted of three JS and three VS. Each student brought one of the books they had read and briefly introduced the other group members



Figure 2. Book talk

to the story from the book in three minutes (Figure 2). They later had three minutes to answer their group members’ questions. The students were encouraged to start talking about the main topic of the story they chose, then move towards some interesting details, and finally give their own feelings or opinions about the story. There were two rounds for this activity, which meant the students could be in two different groups and present about their book twice. The activity helped the students feel that their ER practice was more meaningful and more tangible. They were ultimately motivated to read more comprehensively so that they could be ready to present to their peers and express their ideas more fluently and more coherently. They also could directly discuss their favorite book with their peers, which was another good motivator for the students to enhance their ER practice.

Walk Rally

The walk rally was a cultural activity which took place in the downtown center of Ho Chi Minh City on the second day of the exchange event. The activity not only enabled the JS to explore this part of Vietnam, but also strengthened friendship between the two groups of students. Each team was composed of three JS and three VS. The JS were given a Japanese question paper including clues to five checkpoints,

and they had to translate the clues into English for the VS to guess where the checkpoints were. After solving the clues, each team had to visit the five checkpoints in turn and complete the tasks that the committee members at each checkpoint assigned them to do to get scores. The team which arrived at the checkpoint the soonest and finished the tasks the fastest would gain higher scores than other teams. During the activity, the students had to gather once to have lunch together and share with each other about their experience (Figure 3). Like other activities in the exchange event, the walk rally provided the students with good opportunities to communicate in English with their peers within a real-life context. Not only were the students excited about cultural exploration with their foreign friends, but they also recognized their abilities in using English outside the classroom, which was an important factor to motivate their English study.

Dinner at ELISA

The exchange event was wrapped up with a warm and friendly dinner party at ELISA restaurant, along with an award session for the winning team of the walk rally. The teachers also shared their thoughts about the event and some future plans for further ER exchanges.

Results

As noted in the passage above, the exchange program had five main activities, a robot demonstration, a poster session, a book talk, a walk rally and a dinner. A questionnaire was conducted to assess the students' satisfaction and self-evaluation on the exchange (see Appendix A). Overall, both groups of students were satisfied with the event. If we look closely at the survey, it shows three explicit differences in their results, which



Figure 3. Having lunch together

are satisfaction tendency, the factors of difficulties, and ER effect.

Outcome 1 Satisfaction Tendency

The JS preferred entertaining activities to presentation ones while the VS rated both similarly (Figure 4). The JS were most satisfied with the walk rally; however, this is not surprising because they enjoyed the sight-seeing in the city center of Ho Chi Minh. The point is that more VS said they enjoyed the presentation activities. There are two reasons. One is that the VS were more concerned with learning different cultures, and said that in the walk rally all the members focused on finishing the task and therefore they couldn't talk much about other topics. Some preferred the presentation activities such as the poster session because it was the first time they spoke English with foreign friends and learned about different cultures. The other is that their satisfaction with the presentation activities depended on how well they could communicate in English. According to the survey regarding the book talk and the poster session, the VS could conduct their interactions better than the JS, especially when answering the questions (see Appendix B). They could understand each other with some visual aids and ask some questions; however, the gap

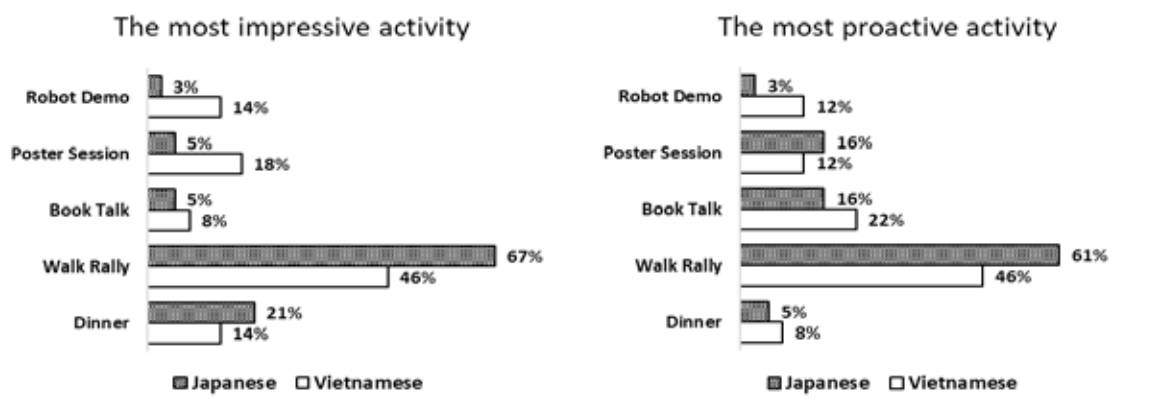


Figure 4. The most impressive activity and the most proactive activity

between the JS and the VS in their responses made a difference to their satisfaction.

Outcome 2 The Factors of Difficulty

More JS felt they had difficulties in English communication than VS. Only two out of 40 JS answered “No” to the question “Did you feel any difficulty communicating in English?” while 16 out of 50 VS did. The two JS had been overseas for study before, but the 16 VS didn’t have any such experience. The factors of the difficulties in communication are different between the JS

and VS (Figure 5). First of all, the JS found the VS accents difficult to understand. Not only the VS, but the JS also have their own accents in speaking English, so they should reduce their accents to make themselves understood. On the other hand, the VS found it difficult to keep the conversation going longer even when they understood what the JS said.

Outcome 3 ER Effect

Both the JS and VS felt the ER effect but in different domains. The JS didn’t realize it in their real conversation while the VS did (Figure 6).

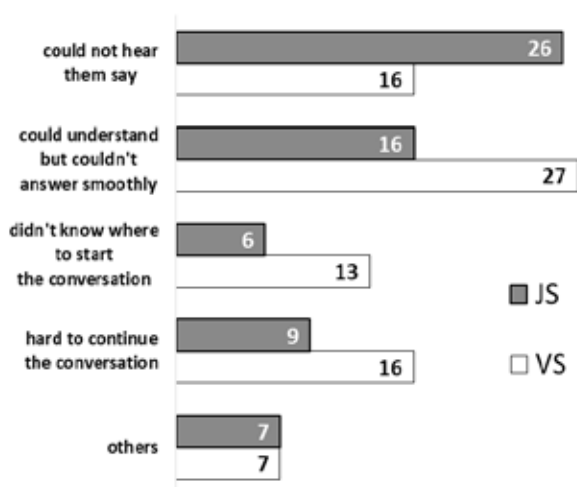


Figure 5. Difficulties communicating in English that JS and VS found

The VS clearly stated that they could use the phrases they had learned in ER in a real conversation; however, the JS didn’t know the effect ER had on the real conversations. The JS said they didn’t try to translate English into Japanese, which must be a big outcome and shows ER may be effective indeed. A few of the JS who mentioned that ER was helpful in conversations took evening seminars in their school where they practiced book talk. This seems to imply that the VS also had opportunities for conversations in English. On the contrary, the VS who participated in the exchange only took three compulsory English courses of

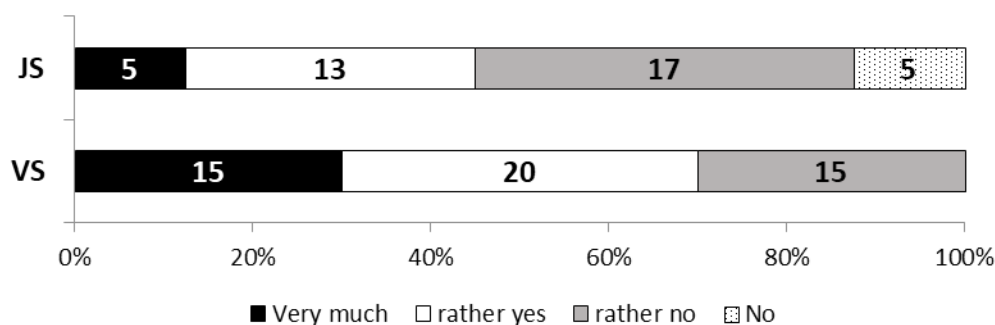


Figure 6. Answers to “You could make use of the phrases learned in ER”

180 learning periods in college, which was not good enough for them to improve all of the four English skills. The VS assumed ER was the most useful way after they finished three English courses in college. However, it can't be explained why the VS could use phrases learned in ER better than the JS if both of them didn't have enough opportunities for communication in English. This needs further research.

Discussion

According to the differences in the difficulties found for both groups of students, we consider what prospects can be given to enhance students' English skills, especially for output. The relations between ER and output have not been made clear yet; however, the survey at least shows that students need the practice of communication activities to keep the conversational ball rolling. The question is what activity is appropriate to make ER more effective. We suggest that two types of activities should be adopted: question and answer (Q&A) practice and additional exchanges.

Prospect 1 ER plus Q&A Practice for Output

It's no doubt that input is necessary to enhance English reading skill, but making

the input into vocabulary they can handle takes a long time. Language teachers should foster productive skills as well. The survey shows that students found Q&A very difficult. Conversation consists of Q&A, and then they must learn to respond spontaneously within the context. As Outcome 2 implies, students can understand more with visual aids. Therefore, book talk should be promoted more as this activity helps students make ER more applicable to enhancing both of their English receptive and productive skills. Through presenting their favorite books orally with the illustrated books at hand, students are more encouraged to initiate conversation and arouse Q&A session with their peers for book discussions.

This can apply to other English classes. Teachers usually ask students about contents and have them answer them. Regrettably, this activity is not Q&A as communication. In class, students are hardly required to have a conversation, asking and answering questions on the spot. In fact, almost all of the VS and about 80% of the JS said they need more communication activities in English class. Both sets of students learn English in an EFL situation, either in Japan or in Vietnam. The lack of communication in English must be compensated for in English class.

Prospect 2 More Exchange in the Future

The survey shows that all the students except one Japanese student want to join a further international exchange in the future. During the event, many students were exchanging on Facebook or Twitter to get in touch with each other in the future. They were so excited with exchanging messages at first. Unfortunately, these messages later faded out, though this is not unusual. NIT and UIT have an exchange space on the Internet called Tadoku (ER) Forums where they can exchange comments on the books they read. However, it's not as active as teachers expected. That's why exchanging should be conducted with teachers' guidance. They should treat the exchange in class continuously if they want to gain good results. Indeed, an international exchange can be a great motivation for students to learn English. The problem is what exchange should be given or what goals should be set.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that students can be motivated by an international exchange. Some want to learn more and others could gain confidence in their English skills. They want to understand each other while they comprehend they need to know more about their own country, as well. Their eyes are open to the new world, and their eyes are looking back at their home country, too. This is one of the most important elements in English teaching education. By reading English books, they will increase their knowledge and learn to communicate with people around the world.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire for ER Exchange Program

ER Exchange Program Questionnaire					
	Name _____				
©Please answer the following questions about each activity.					
1 Poster Session					
1	could explain the topic to NIT students easily and clearly	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
2	could answer the questions from NIT students clearly	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
3	could understand the topic NIT students explained	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
4	could ask questions and exchange some ideas about the poster	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
2 Book Talk					
1	could introduce the book to NIT students easily and clearly	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
2	could answer the questions from NIT students smoothly	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
3	could understand the book NIT students introduced	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
4	could ask questions and exchange some ideas about the book	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
5	got interest in the book NIT students introduced and wanted to read it	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
3 Walk Rally					
1	tried to communicate with NIT students in English proactively	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
2	(to walk rally members) could cooperate to answer the questions at the checkpoints	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
3	(to committee members) could cooperate and fulfill the job as the committee	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
4	could tell NIT students about the history and the culture of Vietnam	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
5	NIT students got interest in the history and the culture of Vietnam	Very much	rather yes	rather not	No
4 Episodes from Exchange					
1	Write an episode you felt "I made it" or "I could communicate well" during the exchange.				
	【Example】 I made the communication smoothly by using the phrases that I learned from the books for ER.				
2	Write an episode you felt "I <i>couldn't</i> make it" or "I <i>couldn't</i> communicate well" during the exchange.				
	【Example】 My answer was off the mark when they asked me				

Appendix B: Results of the Book Talk and the Poster Session

