Extensive reading for productive English classes

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Graded readers are currently growing in popularity in Japan, but graded reading projects tend to focus more on language input than on language production. This report looks at the effort of three instructors at a private Japanese university to pilot the formal use of graded readers as language input for activities in classes that focus on language output. This is an interim report, looking at the rationale for the program and some of the early results. We deemed the pilot to have been successful as there was a noticeable improvement between the students' pre-course and post-course scores on a level placement test. The program will be expanding next year to include seven instructors and approximately 15 classes.

グレーデッドリーダーズ（以降「多読」）は現在日本で人気が高まっているが、多読のプロジェクトはアウトプット（言語生産能力）よりもインプット（言語入力）に焦点が置かれることが多い。本稿は日本の私立大学の三名の講師が試験的プログラムとして行った、正規の教科書の代わりに多読を言語インプットとして利用し、アウトプットに焦点を置いた授業活動について考察した。これは暫定的なリポートであり、このプログラムの論拠と初期段階の成果についての報告である。コースを受ける前後に行われた実力テストの結果を考慮すると、学生達の実力に著しい上昇が見られたことから、この試験的プログラムは成功であったと考えている。このプログラムは拡大し、来年度は七名の講師陣により約15クラスで行われる予定である。

Extensive reading (ER) refers to an approach where students read large amounts of material of a manageable level, both for pleasure and to gain a general overall understanding of the material (Day & Bamford, 1997). Extensive reading can be contrasted with intensive reading in which learners generally read a small amount of fairly difficult material slowly and carefully and for the purpose of language study (Welch, 1997). The aim of the ER approach is for learners to read massive amounts of language at a comfortable level to gain exposure/input, build fluency and consolidate language that was previously encountered discretely through course books and language instruction (Waring, 2006).

Day and Bamford (2002, pp. 137-141) define the key features of extensive reading as follows:

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.

5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual and silent.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

The benefits of extensive reading for ESL/EFL learners are well documented. Numerous research studies have demonstrated learner gains in several areas of language development including reading fluency (Bell, 2001; Iwahori, 2008, Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007), reading comprehension (Bell, 2001; Mason & Krashen, 1997, Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007), vocabulary knowledge (Poulshock, 2010; Day, Omura & Hiramatsu, 1991), writing proficiency (Mason & Krashen, 1997) and motivation (Takase, 2002).

With these benefits in mind, extensive reading is increasingly being advocated and introduced in Japan. One particular advantage of the ER approach in Japan is in providing large amounts of exposure to English material to students who have primarily been instructed in intensive reading for discrete language study and exam preparation. Waring (2006) suggests one probable explanation for the inability of many Japanese students to produce even simple sentences in English after years of study is that they have not encountered enough language to make sense of what they have studied in their classes and course books.

The growing enthusiasm for graded readers is shown in the increasing popularity of ER advocacy groups in Japan. For example, among the SSS Extensive Reading Study Group's chief aims are to demonstrate the effectiveness of ER and provide role models for those wanting to start ER programs (Kawate & Furukawa 2005). The JALT Extensive Reading Special Interest Group (ER SIG) was set up in 2008 as a forming group and was recently accorded full status. Correspondingly, an increasing number of ER programs can be seen across Japan at all levels from public schools through to universities (Oxford University Press, 2006). Publishing companies, in particular Penguin, Oxford, and Macmillan have developed a wide range of materials to accompany and help establish ER programs. We found the OUP guide *The Why and How of Using Graded Readers* (Waring, 2000) particularly useful as it was specific to the Japanese setting.

The focus of ER in Japan so far has generally been on increasing the amount of comprehensible input, as per Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis. This proposes that learners subconsciously acquire language by understanding messages in the language they are exposed to by focusing on meaning rather than form. This is visible in the "how-to" guides, such as the Oxford University Press Graded Reading program guide (OUP, 2006), where many program goals are listed in terms of "exposure" to English. While input is clearly essential to language acquisition, output is largely recognized to play a role as well. As Swain's output hypothesis puts forward, "comprehensible output … is a necessary mechanism of acquisition independent of the role of comprehensible input" (Swain, 1985, p. 252).

We decided to focus on spoken and written language production in the instruction provided in our ER classes. This focus on production in our pilot program courses served two purposes. First, it allowed us to satisfy the curriculum goals for compulsory courses, in which foreign teachers are required to concentrate on speaking and writing for basic communication. Secondly, we believe that providing students the opportunity to speak about their understanding and impression of the books they read not only enhances their experience and interest in the books and reading in general, but also reinforces the language forms and vocabulary they encountered in the books.

Background

Our university has compulsory English in each of its five faculties for 1st and 2nd years, generally totalling just under 4,000 people in any given year. Students are registered in English A and English B classes. English A classes are taught by Japanese teachers and predominantly focus on language input through activities such as intensive reading, grammar/translation, and listening activities. English B classes are taught by the foreign teachers and tend to focus on language output through written and verbal communication. Although English B classes are limited to a maximum of 30 students per class, this upper limit does not extend to the English A classes.

The Language Centre (LC) administers the general English language programs. It is part-controlled by each of the five faculties through representatives serving on the Language Centre committee. Thus each faculty can, in theory, decide what course materials their students received. In the past, this was the case. Recently, however, this decision has been left to the individual teacher, with the result that teachers can choose whatever materials they deem suitable for their classes.

The Centre Head, who serves on the committee, is a faculty member who works within the university on long-term issues for the LC, in addition to regular duties. Three dedicated English-speaking employees, who assist teachers with administrative matters, deal with day-to-day matters in the Language Centre Office. In addition to part-time teachers, 10 full-time contract teachers are employed by the LC to teach English B classes. Besides these duties, the contract teachers also perform other tasks, such as reviewing placement tests, or piloting specific programs, and also use space within the Language Centre office. The ER program in its current form is being developed by us (the authors of this paper) in our role as contract teachers.

Until April 2010, teachers made sporadic use of graded readers in class, but there was no formal ER program in place at the university. General research surrounding ER showed how successful it could be for our students, and several in-class surveys showed good perceived results on the part of students using graded readers in individual teachers' classes. We were keen to incorporate ER in language programs if possible.

We then wrote a proposal and submitted it to the LC Director about piloting the use of ER in some of our English B classes. Originally written in English for use within the LC, the concept met with approval and the Centre Head helped to place the idea within the committee in order to be successful at that level. As a result of negotiation both with the LC and the school administration (*Kyoumuka*), we decided to try the program with a total of 7 classes ranging from beginner to advanced level. It was agreed that the university would try to obtain more books for an LC graded readers library that would be overseen by the LC office staff and housed within the LC Library rather than the Main Library. In order to maintain teacher autonomy we decided to teach the classes individually rather than prepare collective lesson plans or teaching materials. In this way, we could better maintain our own teaching styles as well as better tailor the materials to our classes and our students' individual learning styles.

Pilot project goals

After reviewing the extant LC curriculum we brainstormed and came up with a list of language production skills that either matched or complemented the English B class curriculum skills and could be practiced or taught through the medium of graded readers. The goals we came up with included general goals to be taught by all teachers involved (common goals), as well as goals that were specific to individual teachers (individual goals), usually as a specific instance of the common goals. Examples of these goals are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Program goals

Common program goals	Individual program goals
• Describing a book's content (title, genre, characters, etc.) • Describing people's appearance and personality • Describing relationships between people • Describing order of events • Talking about past events • Talking about future events • Explaining opinion • Describing places • Summarizing a story • Using transition words • Using adverbs of degree	• Paragraph construction (writing a topic sentence, providing supporting details) • Conversation strategies (asking for clarification, explaining vocabulary, beginning a conversation) • Constructions for describing plot, character, or setting • Using the text to support opinions • Talk for extended periods of time / speaking fluency

Methods

Common methods and activities

With regard to the use of graded readers, we agreed on several points. Students were required to read a minimum of one book per week outside of class. For the bulk of class time students would speak or write about the book they had read for homework. Additionally, each teacher used a placement activity to guide students to the material at their level (although these activities were not always the same). When borrowing books from the LC Library, students were required to use English with the LC staff to borrow and return books. The library housed just over 300 titles with low headword counts, primarily from the lowest levels on offer from common publishers of ER texts.

The staff used a system known as the "Yomiyasusa Level" (or "YL" for short) to help familiarize themselves with the book levels. This system was developed by Japanese readers, and can be found on the Internet or in a commercially available notebook called "めざせ100万語! 読書記録手帳" (*Mezase 100-mango eigo tadoku kirokutecho* or *Toward One Million Words Pocket Book*, SSS English Study Group, 2005). It contains most of the graded reading texts from major Japanese EFL publishers, as well as additional material. The book was originally used by one of the teachers in the pilot program as a reading logbook, but found to have broader application has proved useful in negotiation with both students and the administration as a common reference.

Individual teacher methods and activities

There were, of course, a number of differences in our approaches, due mainly to differences in teaching style and preferences. One of us focused more on writing for accuracy; one focused more on speaking and repetition for fluency; one focused more on skills development. Thus we all used the graded readers as a basis for English communication activities but each concentrated on different areas or production. Some examples of individual teaching activities follow.

- Paragraph writing activities
- Assessed book reports following a model two-paragraph essay
- Literature circles for critical literary analysis and appreciation
- Rotating pair discussions
- Group and individual presentations
- Simultaneous listening and repeating of pre-recorded story

sections (or *shadowing*, see Murphey, 2001), recorded on the Moodle Voiceshadow Module for peer review

Successes

Language development

We noted that the pilot program had been successful in a number of ways. First, and perhaps most importantly, students had improved their grammar and vocabulary based on the Penguin Readers Placement Tests (Fowler, 2005), a freely available test with 30 grammar and vocabulary multiple choice items based on the levels used in Penguin Readers. These were administered by one teacher to three classes (47 students in total) at the beginning and end of the first semester of study. On average, the students' scores on the thirty-question test improved from 18.38 to 21.04, a gain of 2.66 points. These gains cannot be exclusively attributed to the extensive reading program as the majority of students were taking at least one other class in English. Nonetheless, it is encouraging that the students were able to make improvements in a short time frame (14 weeks).

Motivation

Because students selected the books themselves, they were generally talking or writing about material which they were interested in. The instructors perceived there to be a higher general level of interest among students in the materials compared to other English B classes we were teaching or had taught. For example, some students were reading well above the required minimum (in some cases more than doubling the required goal). Students showed a willingness to converse with teachers and LC staff about what they had read. We are currently administering a survey to our students to assess their experiences in the ER project.

Level appropriacy

Because class levels are norm-referenced and can vary by faculty, year, and other variables, this was felt to be particularly important within our setting. In the ER project we were able to assess individual students levels with a placement test and recommend a suitable level for individual students based on that test. Students could choose to read below this level if they were uncomfortable with the placement (particularly at the start of the program), or if some other need arose. This meant that every student was receiving input at a level he or she was comfortable with.

One teacher employed *Mezase 100-mango eigo tadoku kirokute-cho* to establish word goals for each class. Many students were reading above the required number of texts for the class. One class of elementary level students was set the goal of 15,000 words in eleven weeks of class. By the end of the period, several students reported they had read over 25,000 words, and two students had read over 50,000 words.

Moodle Reader Module

Despite available level information, there was some problem getting students to read at-level. Some students reported wanting to push themselves, while others seemed to lack confidence to move up.

The Moodle Reader Module (<http://moodlereader.org/index.html/>) works within a Course Management System (Moodle), and was used by one teacher to address this problem. By logging on to the school's Moodle site, students could take a quiz to see if they were really understanding the content they had read, and getting instant feedback on the results. Following the introduction of this by one instructor as part of the assessment plan in two classes, it was found that students altered their reading behaviour in order to pass these quizzes. Benefits of

this were felt all around as book reports and in-class discussion became more coherent.

Problems

We encountered three main problems during this pilot program. First was the lack of time, and the impact this had on what we could teach. Meeting only once a week made it difficult to teach some of the necessary skills at sufficient depth in areas such as presentation, writing, and reading. In addition, students had little time to practice these skills and so even if they understood what to do, they were not always able to perfect the skill. Course goals and activities were adapted as a result.

Second was the tendency for lower-level learners to simply reproduce language by rote rather than taking full advantage of the opportunity to expand on what they had read. This was visible particularly in terms of reproducing stories over giving opinions of it, and reporting facts versus inferring information from the text. Although reproduction of the story is an achievement, we had also hoped that students would be able to develop textual inference skills. These skills did not seem to materialize to the extent we had hoped in either written work or classroom discussion. However, this may also be a factor of the time involved in the program.

Third was that some time needed to be set aside to make sure that the students were doing their homework and not trying to 'wing it' in class. Many students are able to reproduce at least a semblance of the story after reading a précis from the back cover of a book or a few pages of a story. Whilst this certainly counts as production, and may even be a useful skill set for students to acquire, it circles complex issues such as plagiarism and fairness that may be difficult for individual teachers to resolve. Within the written form, a software solution to copying is being trialed at the school, but we are far from being able to incorporate a policy on such issues.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the pilot program appears to have been a success. Both students and teachers enjoyed the experience, and students were able to make gains in their English production skills.

Students were able to select and consume materials at an appropriate language and interest level each week. In addition, although each student selected a different book every week, they shared a common learning experience as well as sometimes reading books that their peers had read. This made the classes more meaningful for them and subsequently led to higher levels of motivation.

The teachers liked the pilot program because the lesson format from week to week was quite similar and so they could devote more time to student language production rather than exposition. Because the lessons follow and build on a familiar format, classroom management becomes easier.

Recommendations and future directions

Despite the successes of the pilot program, there are a number of things that we have decided to do differently in the future. We would like to incorporate more technology into the ER program in the form of course management software such as Moodle. This would allow us to more effectively deliver student quizzes as well as offer the students practice with activities such as shadowing or the writing of book reports and so on that could be shared. Such technology could enrich the learning experience. Secondly, although students were generally well-motivated to do the required reading outside of class, it would be better if we could devote more class time to sustained silent reading. This would ensure that everyone had done the homework and could therefore participate more fully in class.

Jenkins states that the breakdown of languages into stress-timed or syllable-timed "... is now thought by many phonolo-

gists to be too strong" (Jenkins 2002), but *katakana* English remains a much reported phenomenon, and drastically impairs our students' spoken production. In addition to intelligibility, when discussing pronunciation, Nation (2008) discusses the role of the "phonological loop" in helping to move language items from working memory to long-term memory. Pronunciation has recently been cited as the "ESL/EFL orphan", in that despite being a perceived need for students, it is an area in which many teachers lack training (Gilbert, 2010). The need to address pronunciation in class remains paramount, but is a particular problem where most input comes in the form of the written word. However, assessment activities such as dramatization or reading aloud (either in class time by peers or as some form of recorded assignment for the teacher) may foster noticing of ideas such as thought groups, intonation, and word stress. These noticings could then be used as "carry-over" items for further classwork (Lane, 2010).

In addition, there are a few different directions that we would like to see ER taken by the university. The use of graded readers in class is ideally suited to receptive skill classes such as the English A classes (those taught by Japanese English teachers) at our institution, as they tend to be larger and thus have greater level discrepancies within them. If ER were to replace, either partially or fully, intensive reading, it would mean that the gains we have seen in our pilot program would be available to more students.

The wide availability of free worksheets and other materials would make planning for classes easier for English A teachers. In addition, this would also mean that English B teachers could coordinate better with the English A class teachers and develop lessons and activities that maximize the input the students have had from their English A classes. Because much of the support material is free and often bilingual, there is no cost, language, or availability barrier between English A and B teachers.

In summary, it may be that investigating more productive approaches to ER, or using ER as the basis for production as well as the input within the syllabus, will lead to new opportunities within the curriculum (Swain, 1985).

Finally, at the present time, there is some discussion of creating a more flexible system of credits at the school. We feel that as long as it could be overseen properly, ER would also be ideally suited to extra-credit classes in the form of an open-access library or course of individualized instruction.

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