

A Survey of English Extensive Reading

— With Special Reference to University Students' Positive Attitude —

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Abstract

Reading in language teaching is the most important of the four skills though the current focus is on listening and speaking. Reading is both a thinking process and a productive activity. It is more than just receiving meaning in a literal sense. It involves using a greater thinking ability or cognitive effort. In this paper the authors examine extensive reading as a whole and practice a method of extensive reading that is most suitable to university students. First the authors instruct 200 students in introductory reading strategies of extensive reading. After that the authors give them a chance to read extensively through their free choice among approximately 500 different books. Prior to the beginning of this practice, the students were given a questionnaire about English language learning. The same questionnaire was administered at the end of the semester. The results suggest that extensive reading is an effective way to enhance students' positive attitude toward learning English.

Introduction

The authors chose this subject of study for the following three reasons. Firstly, reading in language teaching is by far the most important of four skills. Secondly, in Japan, reading classes traditionally emphasize intensive reading, where the focus is on accuracy, comprehension, and translation. But it is also important to develop fluency in reading, to help students to read extended passages rapidly. The authors would like to examine an approach that the authors used with extensive reading in the class and outside the class.

Thirdly, the authors would like to correct the excessive decline of students' motivation for learning through extensive reading which focuses their learning in a favorable climate.

The students were taught introductory reading strategies through Phrase Reading, Guessing Words, and Paragraph Reading. Graded texts from Oxford and Penguin Readers suitable for the students' needs, levels and interests were provided, so as to energize and motivate them to read the books. During 12 weeks, some students read more than twenty books and wrote excellent descriptions of their impressions. It was useful for the students to choose the books they read.

Results of Quantitative Questions

The Foreign Language Center (FLC) of Jissen Women's University offers a Basic English Course required for the first-year students. On a trial basis, in the first semester of 2008, the authors introduced an extensive reading program to the students of five classes in order to stimulate their attitude toward English and their reading activity.

The five classes were as follows: four classes of English majors and one class of Japanese majors (JP). The English majors were divided into two groups based upon the results of the ITP test. Then, each group was sub-divided into two according to the results of the FLC's placement test to arrange a Challenge class (C) and an ordinary class (A) for each group. Consequently, there were four classes for English majors—C1 and A1 (upper half of ITP) and C2 and A2 (lower half of ITP), respectively.

The students of these five classes were asked to answer two questionnaires, one before and one after the extensive reading program. In order to make the data as precise as possible, the authors analysed only the data for students who answered both questionnaires. The total number of students analysed was as follows: C1 <34 students>, A1 <27 students>, C2 <29 students>, A2 <26 students>, and JP <29 students>.

Among the questions asked in the questionnaires was a question regarding the students' attitude toward their reading activity ("Do you like reading English?" / "Did you come to like reading English?"), since their interest in reading English is a key to the success of this program. The results are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 “Do you like reading English?” / “Did you come to like reading English?” (% rounded)

		C1		A1		C2		A2		JP	
		人数 (ST)	割合 (%)	人数 (ST)	割合 (%)	人数 (ST)	割合 (%)	人数 (ST)	割合 (%)	人数 (ST)	割合 (%)
ア) 好き (Like)	実施前 (Before)	4	12%	4	15%	5	17%	3	12%	2	7%
	実施後 (After)	15	44%	7	26%	5	17%	7	27%	6	21%
	差 (Dif.)	11	32 pts.	3	11 pts.	0	0 pt.	4	15 pts.	4	14 pts.
イ) どちらか といえば好き (Somewhat like)	実施前 (Before)	23	68%	16	59%	13	45%	12	46%	10	34%
	実施後 (After)	19	56%	16	59%	18	62%	11	42%	12	41%
	差 (Dif.)	-4	-12 pts.	0	0 pt.	5	17 pts.	-1	-4 pts.	2	7 pts.
ウ) どちらか といえば嫌い (Somewhat dislike)	実施前 (Before)	7	21%	5	19%	11	38%	9	35%	1	38%
	実施後 (After)	0	0%	2	7%	6	21%	7	27%	5	17%
	差 (Dif.)	-7	-21 pts.	-3	-12 pts.	-5	-17 pts.	-2	-8 pts.	-6	-21 pts.
エ) 嫌い (Dislike)	実施前 (Before)	0	0%	2	7%	0	0%	2	8%	6	21%
	実施後 (After)	0	0%	2	7%	0	0%	1	4%	6	21%
	差 (Dif.)	0	0 pt.	0	0 pt.	0	0 pt.	-1	-4 pts.	0	0 pt.

ST: # of students

The comparison between before and after the extensive reading program revealed that more students showed a positive attitude toward the reading activity after the program. To observe the results in more detail, the combined figures for ア) “Like” and イ) “Somewhat like” are shown in Table 2

Table 2 Combined figures for ア) “Like” and イ) “Somewhat like”

		C1		A1		C2		A2		JP	
		人数 (ST)	割合 (%)	人数 (ST)	割合 (%)	人数 (ST)	割合 (%)	人数 (ST)	割合 (%)	人数 (ST)	割合 (%)
ア) 好き+イ) どちらか かといえば好き (Like + Somewhat like)	実施前 (Before)	27	79%	20	74%	18	62%	15	58%	12	41%
	実施後 (After)	34	100%	23	85%	23	79%	18	69%	18	62%
	差 (Dif.)	7	21 pts.	3	11 pts.	5	17 pts.	3	11 pts.	6	21 pts.

ST: # of students

C1: 79%→100% (up 21 points) A1: 74%→85% (up 11 points)

C2: 62%→79% (up 17 points) A2: 58%→69% (up 11 points)

JP: 41%→62% (up 21 points)

These figures indicate that our extensive reading program has so far been

successful, especially in C1 (100%) and A1 (85%), the upper two classes of English majors. Since these two classes showed a higher percentage of success than the others, the authors will discuss two more questions which they found to be of interest from the questionnaire that the C1 and A1 classes answered.

【Questions of further interest】

Q4. “Are you worried about skipping any words you do not know while you are reading English?”/“Are you still worried about skipping any words you do not know while you are reading English?”

Q5. “What would you do if you encounter any words you do not know while you are reading English?”/“What did you do when you encountered any words you did not know while you were reading English?”

To begin with, the results of Q4 (Are you worried about skipping words?) for C1 and A1 are focused on as follows:

Table 3 Results of Q4 for C1 and A1 (% rounded)

		C1		A1	
		人数 (ST)	割合 (%)	人数 (ST)	割合 (%)
ア) 気にならない (No)	実施前 (Before)	1	3 %	2	7 %
	実施後 (After)	8	24%	6	22%
	差 (Difference)	7	21 pts.	4	15 pts.
イ) あまり気にならない (Somewhat No)	実施前 (Before)	10	29%	9	33%
	実施後 (After)	17	50%	12	44%
	差 (Difference)	7	21 pts.	3	11 pts.
ウ) ときどき気になる (Somewhat Yes)	実施前 (Before)	20	59%	15	56%
	実施後 (After)	7	21%	9	33%
	差 (Difference)	-13	-38 pts.	-6	-23 pts.
エ) 気になる (Yes)	実施前 (Before)	3	9 %	1	4 %
	実施後 (After)	2	6 %	0	0 %
	差 (Difference)	-1	-3 pts.	-1	-4 pts.

ST: # of students

Again, to observe the results in more detail, the combined figures for ア) “No” and イ) “Somewhat No” are shown in Table 4

Table 4 Combined figures for ア) “No” and イ) “Somewhat No” (% rounded)

		C1		A1	
		人数 (ST)	割合 (%)	人数 (ST)	割合 (%)
ア) 気にならない +イ) あまり気にならない (No + Somewhat No)	実施前 (Before)	11	32%	11	41%
	実施後 (After)	25	74%	18	67%
	差 (Difference)	14	42 pts.	7	26 pts.

This table shows that 74% of the C1 students and 67% of A1 students say they are not worried about skipping any words they do not know while reading English. This means that the students tried hard to read English without using a dictionary so often and that they enjoyed the extensive reading program.

Let us now look at Q5: “What would you do if you encounter any words you do not know while you are reading English?” / “What did you do when you encountered any words you did not know while you were reading English?”

Table 5 Results of Q5 for C1 and A1 (% rounded)

		C1		A1	
		人数 (ST)	割合 (%)	人数 (ST)	割合 (%)
ア) まず辞書をひいて その単語の意味を調べる (Use a dictionary every time.)	実施前 (Before)	4	12%	4	15%
	実施後 (After)	1	3 %	0	0 %
	差 (Difference)	-3	-9 pts.	-4	-15 pts.
イ) ひとくぎり読んだ後に 辞書をひき意味を調べる (Use a dictionary after reading a paragraph.)	実施前 (Before)	15	44%	12	44%
	実施後 (After)	11	32%	10	37%
	差 (Difference)	-4	-12 pts.	-2	-7 pts.
ウ) 辞書はひかずに そのまま読み進む (Continue reading without a dictionary.)	実施前 (Before)	5	15%	5	19%
	実施後 (After)	18	53%	11	41%
	差 (Difference)	13	38 pts.	6	22 pts.
エ) 何回かその前後を読んで その単語の意味を考える (Guess the meaning from the context.)	実施前 (Before)	10	29%	6	22%
	実施後 (After)	4	12%	5	19%
	差 (Difference)	-6	-17 pts.	-1	-3 pts.
オ) その他 (Others)	実施前 (Before)	1	3 %	0	0 %
	実施後 (After)	0	0 %	1	4 %
	差 (Difference)	-1	-3 pts.	1	4 pts.

ST: # of students

According to the figures for ウ) in Table 5, students did their best to read through books without consulting a dictionary (C1: 15%→53% <up 38 points>; A1: 19%→41% <up 22 points>).

The authors assume that in this extensive reading program the students put their first priority on cover-to-cover reading activity rather than on inferring from the context. Probably, the students attempted to gain a picture of the story instead of just focusing on the details of it. However, it is too early to make a conclusion on this matter. The authors recognize that further analysis and investigation will be needed in this area.

In sum, the authors can observe the following points from the results mentioned above:

- (1) The students have come to like reading English.
- (2) The students have become used to reading English.
- (3) The students tried to read through English books without consulting a dictionary and without paying much attention to the details of a story.

This extensive reading program is still preliminary and many things need to be improved. However, it is so far successful according to the data mentioned above. Thus, in the second semester of 2008, the authors have expanded the extensive reading program to other classes (11 classes in total).

The rationale behind the project

The extensive reading project was formed as a supplemental component to the intensive English learning course planned and conducted by a team of teachers of the FLC. The belief behind the project is that it is important for the learners to learn to read both carefully and efficiently to be a good language learner (Nation, 2007). A good reader will benefit from efficient reading in the course of language learning at various aspects, e.g. vocabulary building, time saving, developing the sense of word usages. There were the pedagogical reasons for starting the project. The main idea was to maximize the learners' exposure to English through extensive and stress-free reading.

Reading is a completely voluntary activity. The learners borrow books from the class bookshelf after each class session. The books were not directly related to the content of the class lessons. To read or not to read was up to the students. Thus the project started as a supplemental, albeit independent, project.

Choosing books should be carried out carefully so that the learners can freely select enjoyable books and ones that they can read easily, e.g. checking the unknown words in the dictionary or consulting grammar books. By reading books at the right level of difficulty, the learners can maintain the initial motivation to learn and will be able to progress to a higher level. Maintaining the initial motivation throughout the program (Dörnyei, 2001) will be necessary. The choice is completely up to the learners' interests so that the freedom of choice will be guaranteed. The learners' progress is considered for extra reward in the course and no penalty is given for not-reading so that the freedom from fear will maintain and enhance motivation (Dörnyei, 2005, 2001). The learners are encouraged to choose an easier book when they find the first choice is not readable or not enjoyable. The easiest books on the bookshelf use less than 300 words so the learners' vocabulary size will be able to cover the essential comprehension, i.e. the vocabulary coverage, of the text (e.g. Nation, 2000).

Reading is one of the best sources of enjoyment in learning a foreign language so it can be the goal of learning per se. In addition, as a source of learning, reading can establish previously learned vocabulary and grammar and it can also help learners learn more (Nation, 2007). As the learners gain reading skill, reading fluency especially, through extensive reading their enjoyment can increase along with the language skill.

Discussion

A reading program should be carefully planned and be monitored (Nation, 2007). However, the nature of voluntary reading and learning from reading outside class limited the extent of planning. Since the learning through extensive reading is mainly incidental learning, it is essential (Nation, 2007) but practically very difficult to control the quality and quantity of input. Thus the main focus of this project shifted toward motivating and maintaining it through extensive reading rather than learning through reading. In order to control the learning factors of extensive reading, it should better occur within class time. The keynote research by Day and Bamford (1998) characterizes extensive reading is a large quantity of varied, self-selected, enjoyable reading at a reasonably fluent speed (cited by Nation, 2007). In this project, these characteristics were only loosely controlled. While there were learners who read a large amount, others read none. This is because the reading was

treated as a voluntary activity and no amount was set as compulsory. Thus a statistical analysis was very limited and only the descriptive figures are included in the study. No pre-and post-test of proficiency was conducted, so the effect of extensive reading on learning per se cannot be discussed here.

Instead, it was discovered that the learners' motivation and understanding the importance of reading increased as the reading project went on. Pre- and post-questionnaires showed motivation-maintenance in general was successful and positive attitudes toward reading and learning were observed. Further research will be necessary in order to discuss the efficiency and/or effectiveness of extensive reading on language learning. As far as this small scale project is concerned, extensive reading has proved effective in motivation-maintenance and, therefore, it is highly likely to contribute to learning.

Further research should also be conducted of a closer monitoring of the development and maintenance process. More qualitative and longitudinal analysis should reveal the nature of extensive reading in addition to analyzing the survey data statistically. As far as the current project is concerned, the learners have already revealed their own distinctive taste or preference in terms with the style and nature of writing. Further research should carefully produce clearer, precisely focused survey questions (Brown, 2001). It should also utilize task-based input as a moderator of learning. Although it will sacrifice some of the freedom-of-fear effects, task-based input with explicit instruction sometimes during the whole reading project would enable the researcher to monitor the output and analyze the effect on specific features of learning (Ellis, 2003).

Finally, extensive reading is at the frontier of reading research. This paper reported a project performed by a team of teacher-researchers whose primary mission is teaching -- delivering skills and knowledge of English. The results of this research will serve as a base for further research on extensive reading.

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