

A Practice of English Extensive Reading

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Abstract

The Foreign Language Center (FLC) of Jissen Women's University offers an Integrated English course required for the first-year students. The aim of this course is to enhance motivation for the students to acquire English and help the students to be autonomous learners. On a trial basis, a practice of English extensive reading project was adopted in 2006 and has been improved year by year. The reason why we focused on reading was that reading is both a thinking process and a productive activity. It is more than just receiving meaning in a literal sense. It involves bringing a greater thinking ability or cognitive effort.

In our previous studies (Jones et al. 2009, 2010), we examined the significance and effect of extensive reading in learning English. The result suggested that extensive reading is an effective way to enhance students' positive attitude toward learning English. In the first semester of 2011, all students who took the Integrated English course participated in the project. The total number of the students was 701, and the students' majors were Japanese Literature, English, Food and Health Science, and Humanities and Social Sciences. In extensive reading, students do self-selected reading with only minimal accountability, writing brief summaries or comments on what they have read. This paper will show how we managed the project and analyzes the data obtained, which demonstrated that extensive reading had a good influence on learners' sense and attitude toward learning English.

Organization of Extensive Reading Program

As with most extensive reading programs, the program at Jissen Women's University started on a small scale. The reason for this was that, as is often the case, it was necessary to demonstrate a need for the program or for the library to stock readers before the program could start.

Originally, some ten years ago, when a group of teachers asked the library for some space, we were told that no space was available. Following this, a small space was made available for readers for Childhood Education students. Then, five or six years ago, a group of teachers teaching first-year Basic English under the Foreign Language Center (FLC) agreed to introduce extensive reading on a voluntary basis to some of the top Basic English classes to see what reaction there was from the students. At that time there were very few books, many of which were provided by one of the authors of this paper, so only a limited number of students could borrow them.

As it became clear that there was sufficient interest among the students, the FLC purchased sets of books from Oxford, Penguin, Macmillan and other publishers. It then became possible to expand the program to all the top Basic English classes, still on a voluntary basis.

At the same time, it also became clear that the upper levels of readers from the various publishers were too difficult for first-year students. So although we had expanded the number of books by buying one each of every book in the sets from the publishers, we realized that it was impossible to expect students to advance quickly to the higher levels. This would also go against the whole purpose of extensive reading, which is to read large amounts of books that are within the range of the students' reading ability, thereby making it unnecessary for the students to make frequent use of dictionaries.

This is particularly emphasized by the ideals of SSS (Start with Simple Stories, for example, Furukawa, 2009, Furukawa and Kanda, 2010) which are popular in Japan, and by the idea of restricting the number of unknown words. From this it was clear that we had to concentrate on simple stories that had a word usage which ensured that over 95%-98% of the running words were known to the students (Hu and Nation, 2000; Nation 2008). This rule is more easily applicable than Day and Bamford's "*rule of hand* – no more than five unknown words on the sample page" (Day & Bamford, 1998). (As described later, the meaning of "page" has become

increasingly difficult to define.) The 95%-98% rule was obviously essential if we were to maintain the students' interest.

In other words, it meant that we had to be more selective, and to purchase multiple copies of the lower level readers. At the same time, we had to make sure that the readers were interesting to our students, who were 18- or 19-year-old females. For example, it became clear from listening to comments by students as they selected books that they wanted colorful books with many pictures.

In order to clarify which readers were most popular, we decided to make a computer readable mark sheet for the students to enter their evaluations of each reader from various points of view: was it interesting, useful, recommended for other students, and was the reader easy to understand, both in terms of vocabulary and grammar, as well as in the clarity of the content. Another question asked about the time it took to read the book. Analysis of these evaluations is being used as a guide for further purchases of readers

In order to be able to recommend suitable books to students, we also put seals on each reader to indicate the Headword level and kept records of the number of pages in each reader so that we could evaluate the amount that the students had read at each level. However, as we bought readers from an increasing number of publishers, it soon became evident that neither of these factors was very useful. The reason for this was that the policy of each publisher varied in several ways.

The most important problem appeared in counting the number of pages. At first we simply noted the last page – very simple to do, but very unreliable: some readers had whole pages that consisted of one photograph without any words; others had many pages where a photograph covered half the page; others had different amounts of the pages covered in photographs; yet others were comic-strip type books. Thus, it became very laborious and unreliable to count the number of pages. Finally we realized that the only reliable and standard measurement was the number of words.

Unfortunately, at that time many publishers were not revealing the number of words in their readers – a situation that is being rapidly improved because many teachers have demanded that the number of words be clearly given. A comparison of readers issued five years ago with the same readers issued now will show the difference.

The other problem – Headword counts – was that even readers in the same series with the same Headword count were very different in length. We commonly

described books with the same Headword count as “Thin Macmillans” and “Thick Macmillans”, or “Thin Penguins” and “Thick Penguins”. To overcome this, we asked two other questions on our mark sheet: How long did it take to read? and On what page did you stop reading? to find the length of time taken to finish the book and the extent to which students maintained interest in the book. Finally, and much too late, we found *The Complete Book Guide for Extensive Reading* (Furukawa and Kanda, 2010) which gave the YL (Yomiyasusa Level or reading ease) of almost all readers that have been published. This book has now become our bible for evaluating reader levels, and all our readers have been marked with additional colored seals to indicate the YL level.

Procedure

1. Preliminary guidance

In Japan, English instruction at high school and college level usually employs the ‘intensive reading procedure’. The ‘extensive reading procedure’, on the other hand, has attracted comparatively little interest. Most students have not experienced extensive reading. The students were taught the introductory reading strategies of Guessing words, Phrase reading, Scanning and Skimming to develop fluency in reading. They should use the readers without checking the words in the dictionary, and try to read as many as possible of the simple level readers to gain confidence before going on the next level. If they suddenly start with a higher level, there is danger that they will find that it takes too long and that they will lose interest.

2. Graded Readers

Graded texts from Oxford, Penguin, Macmillan, Cambridge, Scholastic Readers and others suitable for the students’ needs, levels and interests are now available, and they energize and motivate the students to read the books. We have a stock of over 1,000 readers in the FLC office. They are marked by a colored seal to divide them according to the number of headwords. There are several copies of each book, so there is a number written on the seal to show the number of the book. For example, ⑤ shows that it is the 5th copy.

This Color system is for headwords. (See the Appendix for details.)

Pink: Easy- The Easy books are very short and use very few different words.

Yellow: Beginner- The Beginner books are fairly short and the content is simple.

Red: Low Intermediate

Blue: Intermediate

Green: High Intermediate

White: Advanced

By starting with the lowest level and then working up, the students will find that there are fewer new words each time and it becomes easy to read books.

The readers are marked with two different numbers: a 6-digit number code on the back of the book and a colored seal with a number on the front. Each book has a unique 6-digit number code on the back; the colored seal on the front shows the level of the book; and the number written on this colored seal shows how many of each book we have.

The 6-digit number code on the back of the book has the following meaning, reading from the left.

1st and 2nd digits: the number of the book in the series.

3rd digit: the name of the publisher

4th digit: the level of the book

5th and 6th digits: the number of words in units of 100

For example, the number code for The Wizard of Oz is 275154. This means that it is No. 27 in the Oxford Bookworm Series (5) Level 1 (1) and has 5400 words (54).

More and more publishers are entering the extensive reading market recently, and there is a big difference in the ideas and levels of each company. To overcome this, we have added an additional seal to the top corner of the back of the reader to indicate the YL (as explained above).

3. How to lend the books

There are two main ways of using these readers in this project: lending out to students for one week using an empty classroom as a bookstore or using the books in the library.

The challenge classes started two weeks earlier than regular classes so that readers returned by the challenge classes would ensure sufficient quantities in stock. The students who want to read more books use the library as much as possible. The students should write a book report (a copy of the computer readable card) and hand in the copy and the computer readable card).

4. Computer readable card

The students use the card for each book they read. They hand in the copy and

the computer readable card every class. At the end of the semester, we give recognition to the students who read most and wrote excellent reports.

We use the resulting data to grasp the trends and increase the number of readers.

As explained above, the students check the following points: how much time they took, how difficult the sentences are, how difficult the content is, how interesting the reader is, how helpful it is for them to learn English, and how much they would recommend the reader to another student. They also write a summary and comment either in English or Japanese on the back of the copy. (See the Appendix for a copy of the computer readable card.)

Some Statistical Perspectives on the Data

The data studied were the students' evaluation of the following items: Difficulty of Passage (Difficult to understand the English), Difficulty of content (Difficult to follow the story), Being Interesting or not, Usefulness, Recommendability.

Because learners read material that they can easily understand, reading speed should be faster than their normal reading mode.

Dictionary use makes rapid reading impossible so it should be discouraged. However the magic number of 95-8% coverage makes it extremely difficult to find reading material which can be read with ease and with interest. Naturally, the adult false beginners do not always find a picture book of *Snow White* intellectually attractive.

		Passage	Content	Interest	Useful	Recom.
Difficulty Passage	Pearson Correlation	1	.800(**)	.220(**)	.113(**)	.153(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.002	.000
	N	743	743	743	743	740
Difficulty Content	Pearson Correlation	.800(**)	1	.316(**)	.198(**)	.232(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000	.000
	N	743	743	743	743	740
Being Interesting	Pearson Correlation	.220(**)	.316(**)	1	.591(**)	.670(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.	.000	.000
	N	743	743	743	743	740
Usefulness	Pearson Correlation	.113(**)	.198(**)	.591(**)	1	.587(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000	.000	.	.000
	N	743	743	743	743	740
Recommend-ability	Pearson Correlation	.153(**)	.232(**)	.670(**)	.587(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.
	N	740	740	740	740	740

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The reliability statistics gave a Cronbach's Alpha of .0756. The table above shows that the perception of the general difficulty of text is closely correlated to that of the difficulty of text complexity. On the other hand, the other three variables, the levels of being entertaining, useful, and recommendable, are also closely correlated with each other. The first two variables as for difficulty levels and the latter three upon enjoyable levels are correlated statistically significantly but with lesser strength. In the next section, we will look at the tendency of students' reading at different individual levels.

1. Readers in Total

Of all the book series, the Penguin Readers were read most. The authors have decided to analyze the results of this series of books.

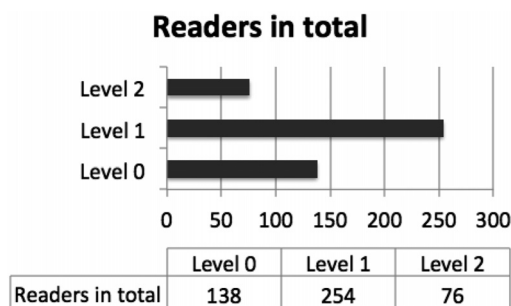
In the Extensive Reading Program, three book levels (92 titles in total) of the Penguin Readers were offered to the students as follows:

- (1) Level 0: 24 titles (number of headwords: approx. 200)
- (2) Level 1: 34 titles (number of headwords: approx. 300)
- (3) Level 2: 34 titles (number of headwords: approx. 600)

Level 0 was intended to be a starter of the Extensive Reading Program, as most students were new to extensive reading in English. Books of Levels 1 and 2, intended to be main level read by the students, accounted for approximately 75% of those 92 titles.

Graph 1 ("Readers in total") shows a distribution of a total of students who read the Penguin Readers (468) throughout the Extensive Reading Program.

According to the statistics, it seems that many students had a relatively high motivation to read the English books extensively. For instance, the ascending



【Graph 1】

current from Level 0 to Level 1 (138→254) is observed. This is probably because the Extensive Reading Program urged the students to read as many books as they could.

2. Questions to be Answered by the Students

The students were asked to answer these five questions every time they finished reading the books. There were four scales for each question that the students marked on the computer readable card. On the computer card, the values are written from 0 (Easy) to 3 (Difficult), but when calculating the statistics, it was found necessary to reverse this to give the following values:

(1) Difficulty of Passage

0: Difficult 1: Somewhat difficult 2: Somewhat easy 3: Easy

(2) Difficulty of content

0: Difficult 1: Somewhat difficult 2: Somewhat easy 3: Easy

(3) Interesting

0: Boring 1: Somewhat boring 2: Somewhat interesting 3: Interesting

(4) Useful

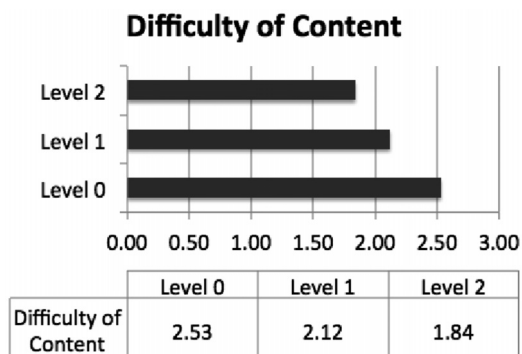
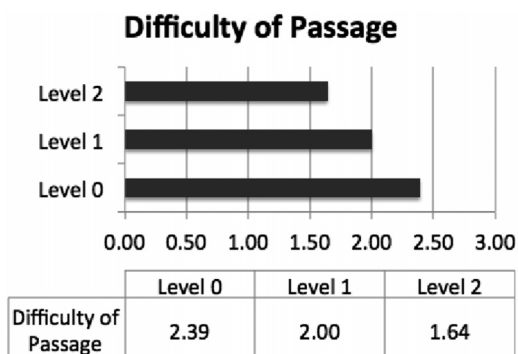
0: Useless 1: Somewhat useless 2: Somewhat useful 3: Useful

(5) Recommendable

0: Non-recommendable 1: Somewhat non-recommendable 2: Somewhat recommendable 3: Recommendable

3. Findings from the Data Analysis

The bar graphs represent the results of the data analysis based on the answers from the students who marked the computer cards.

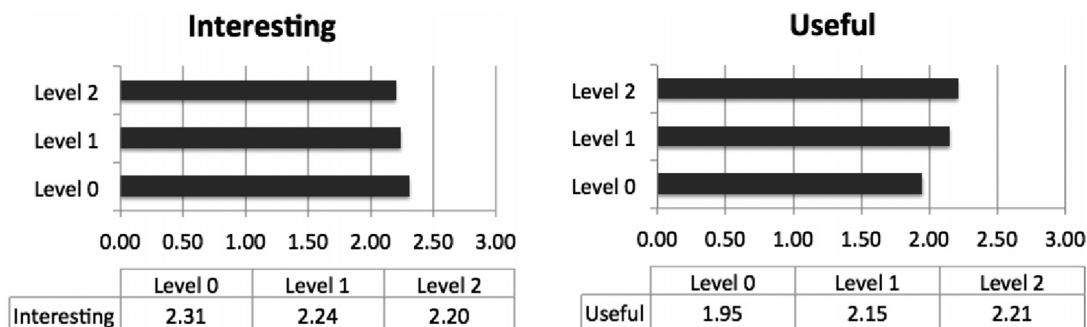


(figures: average of Scales marked by the students)

【Graph 2】

【Graph 3】

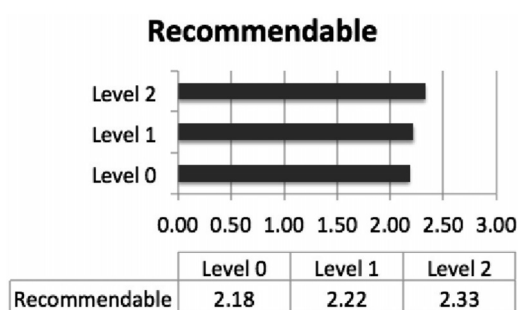
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(figures: average of Scales marked by the students)

【Graph 4】

【Graph 5】



(figures: average of Scales marked by the students)

【Graph 6】

(1) Graphs 2 and 3

A correlation is observed between Graphs 2 and 3: if the passages are easy for the students to read (high score), then the contents are easy for them to understand (high score) and vice versa

(2) Graph 4

One interesting piece of data for Level 2 was observed. In general, if the books were “difficult”, they would be considered “difficult” rather than “interesting”. However, with Level 2, a total of 76 students (see Graph 1) think that the books were “somewhat difficult” (Graph 2: 1.64; Graph 3: 1.84), but that the books were “somewhat interesting” (Graph 4: 2.20). Probably, the students have come to learn that reading English books is a difficult but nevertheless interesting activity, thanks to the Extensive Reading Program.

(3) Graph 5

Graph 5 is about the question being asked whether or not the Extensive Reading Program would be useful to the students' study of English. As the levels go up, the students tend to think that the Extensive Reading Program helped them study English to some extent. This is one of the good effects that the Extensive Reading Program had on the students' study of English.

(4) Graph 6

This graph shows an interesting finding. The most difficult level (Level 2) presents the highest average figure (2.33) of all levels, although there are small differences between Levels 0, 1, and 2.

4. Summary of the Data Analysis

In sum, although the data is limited, the Extensive Reading Program may be concluded to be successful:

The books of Level 1 are not so useful to the students' study of English, probably because they are easy (somewhat easy) to read and to understand. The books of Level 1 seem an adequate (or intermediate) level for many students as this level shows the largest number of students (254) who read the books. On the other hand, however, the books of Level 2 are interesting and recommendable to other students even though they are difficult (somewhat difficult) to read and understand.

So far, overall result of statistic analysis, which is just at the very beginning stage, implies that we can extract a lot of interesting insights. Statistical data mining gives us a good chance to grasp the students' response and to gain better insights for the future development of this extensive reading project.

	Difficulty of Passage and Content	Interesting	Useful	Recommendable
Level 2	“Somewhat difficult”	“Somewhat interesting”	“Somewhat useful”	“Somewhat recommendable”
Level 1	“Somewhat easy”	“Somewhat interesting”	“Somewhat useful”	“Somewhat recommendable”
Level 0	Between “Somewhat easy” and “Easy”	“Somewhat interesting”	slightly behind “Somewhat useful”	“Somewhat recommendable”

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【Color System for Graded Readers】

	Oxford	Cambridge	Macmillan	Penguin	Cengage	RIC	Scholastic	
	Level	H-word	Level	H-word	Level	H-word	Level	H-word
Pink	S	250	1(S)	200	6	300	S	300
			Easy Start		P T	200		
					P T	300		
Yellow	1	400	1	300	7	350	1	500
					P T	400		
					P T	550		
Red	2	700	2	600	P T	700	2	1000
					P T	900	1	600
					FP	800		
					FP	1000		
Blue	3	1000	3	1100	3	1200	P T	1100
					PT/FP	1300		
	4	1400	4	1400			3	1500
							3	1500
Green	5	1800	5	1600	4	1700	PT/FP	1600
							PT/FP	1900
							4	2000
White	6	2500	6	2200	5	2300	P T	2000
							PT/FP	2600
							FP	2200
	6	3800	6	3000	6	3000	FP	3000

YL Classifications & Jissen Readers

YL Label on back 裏のラベル		No. of books and label on front 表のラベル			Total Books 合計冊数
		Pink	Yellow	Red	
Yellow 15mm	0.1 0.2 0.3 0.4 0.5	98	15		113
Red 15mm	0.6 0.7	196			196
Blue 15mm	0.8 0.9	174			174
Green 15mm	1.0 1.1	173	102		275
White 15mm	1.2 1.3	63	25	12	100
Silver 14mm	1.4 1.5 1.6	23	38	9	70
Gold 14mm	1.7 1.8 1.9 2.0		26	21	47
Pink 14mm	2.1 2.2 2.3 2.4 2.5		142	223	365
Yellow 20mm	2.6 2.7 2.8 2.9				
Red 20mm	3.0 3.1 3.2 3.3				
Blue 20mm	3.4 3.5 3.6 3.7 3.8 3.9				
Green 20mm	4.0 4.1 4.2 4.3 4.4 4.5 4.6 4.7 4.8 4.9				
White 20mm	5.0 5.1 5.2 5.3 5.4 5.5 5.6 5.7 5.8 5.9				
Total Books		727	348	265	1340