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## **Effects and Impact of Extensive Reading in Japanese University English for General Purpose Classes**

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### Abstract

Extensive reading is one of the language learning strategies (LLS) that has proved to have positive effects on students' English ability such as improving their reading speed, reading fluency, and grammatical accuracy. A recent study on extensive reading at a Japanese university assigned students 45 minutes to read graded readers (GR). Unfortunately, most Japanese university English for General Purpose (EGP) courses only meet once a week for 90 minutes. This study looks at ways to implement extensive reading in a typical 90-minute EGP class, and examines the extent out of class extensive reading assignment affects students' reading and listening skills. 43 non-English major university freshman students in EGP course were assigned GR in their free time over a semester. Their improvement of listening and reading skills was measured based on the two TOEIC mock tests at the beginning of the semester and the at the end of the semester. Though the results were not significant, this study led to some insights into the parameters of an effective extended reading program including intensity, frequency and duration.

この研究では2016年9月から1月にかけて4ヶ月間行われた授業外多読課題とその効果についての報告をする。多読は英語教育界では英語力を確実に伸ばす言語学習ストラテジー(Language Learning Strategy)として英語教育者及び研究者に広く認知されている。日本の大学の一般教養としての英語(English for General Purposes)の授業で多読を取り入れた成功例として西澤(2012)が週1回、授業内で45分間の多読を4年間続けた研究がある。ところが、日本の多くの大学での一般教養としての英語の授業は週1回、90分を30回が主流であり、授業時間を多読に費やすことが難しい状況である。そこで多読を授業外課題として2週間に1回課し、その効果を2016年後期の初めと終わりでTOEIC形式の短いテストを使って測った。2週に1冊を15週間続ける多読では英語力(リーディング、リスニング)には明確な効果は出なかった。しかし、授業外多読が成果を出すために必要な期間、頻度、1回の多読の時間についての実証実験が今後の課題であるという気づきを得ることができた。

Extensive Reading is a language learning method shown to positively affect students' English proficiency, including reading speed, general language proficiency and improved motivation toward reading (Day, n.d.). Because of the limited number of English for General Purpose (EGP) classes at the university level, the ability to successfully implement extensive reading into EGP classes is limited. Despite the fact that extensive reading (ER) has been shown to be an effective language learning strategy, some researchers point out that extensive reading is not very popular among ESL teachers because it requires a lot of resources and class time (Day &

Bamford, 1998; Gabe, 2009). For example, at my institution which is a middle-sized four-year private university in Tokyo. We offer mandatory freshman 90-minute Japanese General Education English (EGP) courses once a week for 30 weeks over two semesters in the Spring and Fall. Instructors usually choose a textbook based on the focus of EGP classes, such as reading or speaking. If they plan a reading course utilizing the textbook, most of the class time would be spent working on activities from the textbook. Therefore, it is difficult to implement extensive reading in EGP classes.

I have been teaching mandatory EGP reading courses to university first-year students for several years. My classes use a TOEIC preparation textbook for false-beginners in accordance with the curriculum requirements in our institution and are taught using a teacher-centered teaching style. However, students seemed not to be very motivated or showed little improvement on their TOEIC scores. In addition, they were lacking the basic vocabulary or grammar to comprehend short passages or short announcements. Therefore, I decided to implement ER once every two weeks as homework. A bi-weekly scheduled take-home extensive reading activity was decided on to alternate with a vocabulary quiz which was already a part of the course.

### ***How long and how often should ER program in EGP courses be conducted?***

Nishizawa and his colleagues (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010) conducted a study measuring the effects of a long-term ER program. The program included 37 university students who participated in a four-year ER program. The students read graded readers (GR) for 45 minutes once a week for 120 weeks. In this study, the researchers concluded that ER programs should last at least two years to bring about improvement in Japanese university students' English proficiency measured by their TOEIC test scores.

In contrast, Mason and Krashen (1997) studied Japanese university students in EGP courses and observed improvement in EFL learners' English skills with only a four-month semester long extensive reading program. The experiment group read graded readers for 90 minutes once a week for a semester. The non-experiment group of students received a traditional teacher-centered English reading course. Both groups took a cloze test of a 1600-word passage with every 10 words erased. Both the experiment and non-experiment groups took the same test before and after the treatment. The average gain of test score in the experiment group was higher than the non-experiment group.

Although Nishizawa et al. (2010) suggested that the ER program should be continued for least two years, Mason and Krashen's study illustrated that a semester long weekly ER program can improve English skills.

### ***How many words do students need to read to improve their English skills?***

Though studies differ regarding the optimal number of words that should be read, they tend to agree that students need to engage in regular reading habits over extended periods of time.

Nation (2009) states that because of the nature of learning from reading, developing a successful ER program needs careful planning to take effect. Most of the vocabulary acquisition happens from reading occurred by incidentally encountering expressions repeatedly. Therefore, nearly 500,000 words per year need to be read by learners. In addition, this amount of reading has to continue over several years (p. 50). According to Nishizawa et al. (2010), students who read more than 300,000 words over four years demonstrated significant increase in their TOEIC score. In Mason and Krashen's study, though the number of words read was not reported, participants read an average of 30 books over a semester of fifteen weeks.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study consisted of 48 first-year students majoring in Economics and enrolled in an EGP course at a Japanese private university in Tokyo. The students were divided into two groups by class. Five students were excluded from data analysis because of their absence on the day of the pre-test or post-test. Of the remaining 43 students, 40 students were male and three were female students. All the first-year students in their major must take a first-year general English course and an English conversation course. Right after they entered the university, they took TEAP (Test of English for Academic Purposes) as a placement test to be placed in three different levels of EGP classes. Their TEAP score ranged from 40 to 83 points which is equivalent to lower than A1 level on the CEFR. Therefore, they were placed in the lowest level EGP class.

Many students felt demotivated when it came to reading in English. They often struggled to comprehend stories even at the easiest level of graded readers and had difficulty passing online comprehension quiz.

### **Method**

TOEIC mock tests were used as benchmarks to establish a baseline and as a post study measure. Since the course was TOEIC based General English lessons, it was reasonable to compare their reading and listening skills before and after the course. In addition, extensive reading has been attributed to English learners' vocabulary gain, and increased reading speed and comprehension (Namhee, 2017). Students were assigned to read at least six graded readers during the Fall semester of 2016 and expected to go through them at a pace of one book every two weeks. The choice of level and the titles of the books were left to students although I gave suggestions of how to choose

the appropriate level of book they would be able to enjoy reading without consulting a dictionary. Books were recorded as “read” only if students passed the corresponding online comprehension quiz. Most students enjoyed the assignment, but some students had a difficult time finishing the lowest level of Graded Reader or passing online quizzes even though they could understand the book itself. As the semester progressed, I could see two groups of students: a highly motivated and independent group and a group that had no motivation and was dependent on their classmates.

The TOEIC mock tests were included in the TOEIC preparation textbook (Tsumatori & Tahira, 2012) the participants had used in their EGP course throughout the academic year of 2016. The pre-test was conducted on the first or second day of the Fall semester as a part of needs analysis and a progress check from the Spring semester. The post-test was given as a part of their final exam. The TOEIC mock tests that the author used for this experiment included 24 listening questions and 26 reading questions. Pre- and post- tests included completely different questions. Students were asked to solve all the reading questions in 20 minutes in both pre- and post- tests. The difficulty of each test was not compared or analyzed in this study.

The graded reader books the participants read were mostly Penguin Readers, Easystarters to level 6 (200 - 3000-word level), which were available at a self-access learning center on campus. The online comprehension quizzes that they had to pass after reading each book were limited to the books that we had in the facility. Most students seemed to check out books from the self-access language learning center because they are more convenient, and online quizzes were readily available. The level and the content of the books were decided by each student.

At the beginning of the Fall semester of 2016, I instructed students on how to choose an appropriate level of graded readers so that students would not choose a book that were too challenging for them. In addition, instruction about how to take online quiz was given. Every two weeks, I downloaded the data of students’ quiz result and showed them their progress in class to motivate and encourage students to keep working on the task.

### **Analysis**

At the end of the semester, students had read zero to seven books in total. In terms of the number of words, they read zero to 37,129 words. The average number of words each student read was 8,385.

The number of students whose mock TOEIC test total score (Listening and Reading scores combined) increased before and after the ER program was 19. These students read between 5,000 words to 10,000 words or more. The total number of students whose score decreased was 23 and 1

student did not show any change. The number of words read by the students whose scores didn't improve ranged from 0 to 30,000 words.

Students' average scores decreased from pre- to post- test, dropping slightly from 21 to 20.6. When the scores were analyzed by skills, students' listening scores did not change (average 9.7) but the average reading score decreased by 0.3 points from 11.2 to 10.9.

Table 1

*The Difference Between Average Pre-ER Mock TOEIC Test Score and Post ER Test Score*

	<u>(A) Pre-ER test score</u>	<u>(B) Post-test Score</u>	<u>Improvement (B)-(A)</u>
Listening Part	9.7	9.7	0
Reading Part	11.2	10.9	-0.3
Total Score	21.0	20.6	-0.4

The chart below shows the score distribution of participants based on the number of words they had read and the gain and loss of pre- and post- test score. Students who read around 6,000 words gained up to 10 points and lost up to 10 points. In addition, all the students who read more than 20,000 words lost points. Listening and reading scores were analyzed in the same method but no significant difference was observed from the total score analysis.

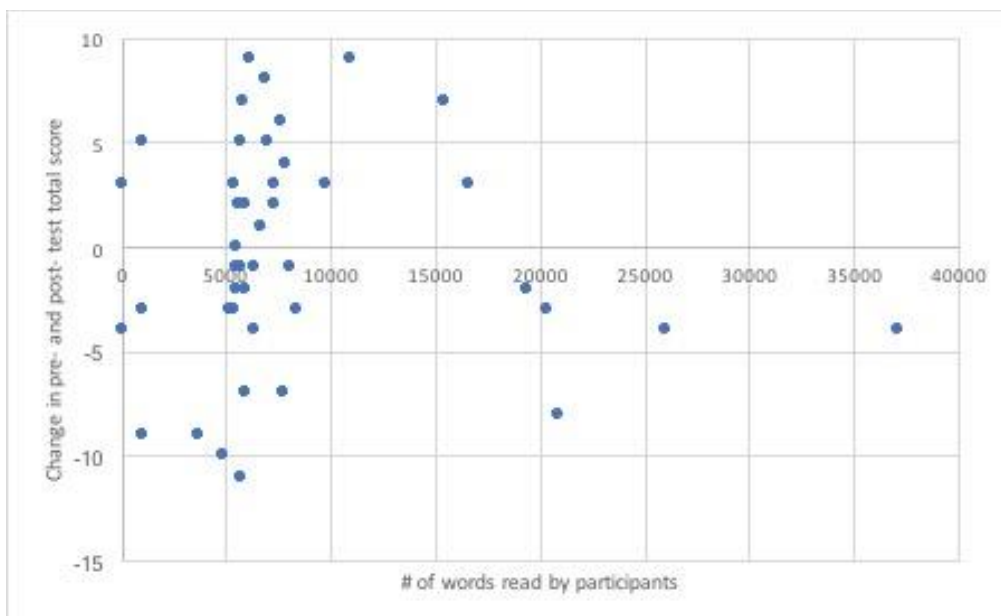


Figure 1. *Number of words read by participants and changes from post- to pre-test scores*

### **Conclusion**

As Grabe (2009) and Day and Bamford (1998) discussed, not many English teachers are in favor of implementing ER programs in their class or curriculum since it takes time and a lot of resources. The present study investigated a short-term ER program and its effect on English proficiency of students, specifically reading and listening skills. However, assigning one take-home graded reader every two weeks for a semester did not show significant improvement in participants' test scores. A clear correlation between the number of words read and the TOEIC mock test scores change was not observed. Regardless of the number of the words students read, some students improved their scores and others did the same or worse. Students who read more words, around 20,000 to 37,000 to be exact, scored lower in the post test. Out of two students who read 0 words, one showed an improvement on their score while the other showed a decline in improvement. In this study, one GR book once every two weeks for a semester did not improve students' test scores. It would seem that the frequency, duration and intensity were not sufficient for these false beginner language learners to show significant improvements on TOEIC type of tests.

### **Discussion**

In previous studies that successfully implemented ER in ESL/EFL classes (e.g. Nishizawa et al., 2010; Mason & Krashen, 1997), teachers monitor students conducting ER in class and provide advice and encouragement. In my study, I gave my students one or two lectures in class at the beginning of semester, but I didn't give any encouragement or advice to individual students since the program was take-home style and comprehension quiz was done online individually. Since I checked the assignment by making sure that students passed the quiz, I could not observe how easy or difficult it was for students to read a GR and pass the quiz. Additionally, in many other ER studies, researchers usually conduct interviews (Nishino, 2007) or collect their reading journal (Mason & Krashen, 1997) to see the changes in students' feelings or attitudes toward ER before and after the experiment. In this study, such a survey was not conducted; however, if I did, I could have observed the change in student motivation toward ER from a different perspective.

Moreover, participants in this study had taken once a week in-class TOEIC-related instruction for fifteen weeks. ER was not the only English input they had had during the semester, so there was a possibility of other English input being the influence of score changes.

To conclude, based on the literature related to this issue and the result from present study, three future research questions came up to my mind. How often do students need to do extensive reading to effectively improve their English skills? How intense should an ER program be? (ex.

frequency of reading) How much instruction and monitoring is needed for students to start reading independently, outside of the classroom?

From this experiment, I have learned that teachers have to commit to make the extensive reading happen in their classroom. When I tried extensive reading as a part of class for the first time, students were excited to try a new method of learning English. However, as they face the difficulty of reading a book in English, some students started to be discouraged. The ultimate purpose of extensive reading, language learners read for pleasure, seemed to be lost. When this kind of mindset occurs, instructors must not give up and find a way to encourage them to keep reading.

### **Notes on the contributor**

Shinobu Nakamura is an Assistant Professor in the British and American Studies Department at Musashi University in Tokyo. Her research interests include English education, self-access language learning, and learner autonomy.

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