

**Extensive reading for silent and weak students:
Report from ER class**

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Abstract

Extensive reading (ER) is a skill that students need to cultivate for its own benefits and for general EFL acquisition, development and fluency. Given the fact that many students do not read extensively either on their own or as homework for their English classes, it is only logical that teachers should teach ER. Students who are shy, silent, less adroit in their speaking classes, and who lack substantial chance to use English outside class, are also likely to benefit from ER activities because of their motivation building qualities and for the opportunity of silent output.

1. Introduction

In previous papers I discussed the importance of implementing Extensive Reading (ER) into EFL curricula for English majors in secondary schools as a method to employ comprehensible input. In my college we do not have an ER program for the whole English Communication Department, only one solitary course for the second-year students. Three years after the implementation of this course, I have reached the conclusion that in its present form this course's impact on the development of students' fluency is minimal. Unless we have a solid program for the whole department, students will not feel obliged to do much reading on their own. Still, the positive feedback from students who took my ER course allows for the recognition of its benefits and indicates that there is a need for such a course. This paper highlights those benefits and needs.

This year (2009), the course's name was changed from *Joukyuu Reading* (Advanced Reading) to a more adequate title: "Easy Reading," which in consequence considerably

influenced student enrollment. For the past three years only 20% of our students took this course, but after the change of the name over 45% enrolled.

Another important factor was that students, who were usually silent and shy in their speaking classes, became highly motivated to read extensively and outside class. It is a well known fact that in many cases, and for more than one reason, a great number of our students remain silent in class. In many cases students do not know what to say or how to express their thoughts, but also it seems to be more than that. I observed that even when students have something to say they often refrain from doing so. I suspect that certain behaviors observed in class might be “culturally designed.” I believe that within one culture students follow certain patterns of behavior that are not easy to overcome or to replace by another set of beliefs only because they are studying a foreign language. Students may even *know* that it is desirable to behave in a certain way, or say certain things, but still be incapable of actually behaving that way. For instance, it is almost inconceivable for a well-brought-up, well-behaved Japanese student to disagree with his teacher openly, while the opposite is not only observed quite frequently in the West, it is one of the teachers’ practices to provoke disagreement, to stir and evoke different opinions, to cultivate intelligent opposition, to persuade and argue, and to enhance logical thinking. Common knowledge has it that Western tradition is built on analyzing and synthesizing, that feelings and thoughts are often verbalized. Along with this verbalization the statuses of the interlocutors are often disregarded in the process; the contents have a priority over status to the extent that a very young person can discuss things with an elderly person on an equal basis provided they are intellectually compatible. However, this is not true in the East where often the social standing, age, rank or ties of kinship dictate what, when, and how things are allowed to be expressed. In its extreme form, people refrain from saying anything if they have to disagree, a behavior almost unthinkable in the West where sudden silence during conversation often has a bad connotation with feelings like shock,

anger or disrespect.

Actually, my average Japanese students are usually not convinced that they should express their opinions or explain how they arrived at them. My average students are often at a loss when asked to explain themselves in Japanese as well. And a shy student is even more reluctant to speak out. We certainly should teach that in other cultures speaking out is not only expected and natural, but also absolutely necessary in cross-cultural situations when exactly for the presence of cultural differences nothing should be taken for granted. On the other hand, I believe that while teaching a foreign language we should also take into account preferences of the methods and skills our learners wish to excel in. A majority of our students, even the shy ones, when asked may express a priority to speaking English above other skills. Still, without repetitious encounters with new vocabulary, phrases, and chunks of language needed for automatic use, learners are not able to memorize them, and in effect become mute when real conversation takes place, or at best formulate their thoughts slowly, with ongoing translation from L1 in their minds. ER provides an area where thoughts are formulated in the language being read, emotions are stirred by words in a foreign language, words and chunks of language are memorized because of numerous encounters in the text, and parts of dialogs beg to be repeated. And all this can happen before students have the courage to speak out.

Besides the obvious benefits of reading in English, do our silent, shy students flock to the Easy Reading class because here at last they feel they can manage studying a foreign language and excel in an important skill in their own capacity? The ER class I am teaching now, as well as the research, is ongoing, so there are still a lot of questions to be answered. However, there are patterns which are best observed in class. In the case of my class, these patterns indicate that ER is the best way to learn a foreign language for those who love reading, those who enjoy autonomous learning, those who are weak readers but want to be strong, and those who are shy. The best outcome outside of becoming a strong reader is

probably the feeling of confidence that the shy and silent students otherwise cannot easily achieve in their speaking classes. The feeling of doing something right, as much as being interested in the contents of a story, is a reward in itself, and my students become “greedy” after this experience. That is where we want them to be: always wanting more.

2. Silent students

There are students who are shy in their own language. They would like very much to learn English, but they are told they must speak out and they find it difficult to change their personality. There are shared qualities about silent students: they do not like talking in front of a class, they do not enjoy working in groups, they prefer individual activities, and they are better off evaluated on their “silent” output. One of my silent students told me she found her niche in ER class because she is not forced to speak, she likes reading books, and even it is fun she feels she is learning English. Another student told me she was advised to write e-mails in English as a fluency developing practice, but she said she doesn’t like writing e-mails because she doesn’t have much to say in them, and she doesn’t like writing anyway. Another student, who does well on English written tests but has difficulty expressing herself verbally even in Japanese and sits alone in class, is taking the same ER class for the second time this year even without credits. She keeps up with everyone in class activities and homework and says she “enjoys every minute of it”. The two students, who score highest in class in number of easy books read, are extremely shy and quiet in their speaking classes. They seem to be hooked on reading now, even though they still read on the 200~300 headwords level. They are in their second and final year of a junior college. There is a good chance that before they graduate, they may be into reading deeply enough to become autonomous learners, and then continue with reading in English their whole life. I think that life-long learning is a goal for both teachers and learners, to be kept in mind always while studying a foreign language.

3. Weak readers

The term “vicious circle” was adopted by Nuttall (1996: 127) to explain how weak readers are unable to become strong readers. According to this theory, the students of my ER class have all the characteristics of weak readers. Their TOEIC reading scores are low, in a range between 105 and 270, with the majority scoring around 150. When they first come to class, students do not know what **extensive reading** is and do not like the only reading they know, i.e. **intensive reading**. Their reading habits in L1 are weak. They tell me they are busy with their part-time jobs, and doing their homework takes all the energy they can devote to studying English anyway. However, when asked to state their goals, unanimously they wish to become fluent in English, and they want to be able to read books on their own. The majority of students who come to this class are silent, shy and not very active in extra activities or social gatherings. According to the EPER classification (see Hill, 1997: online), they can read on G level (300 words of average vocabulary), or lower, with only a few on F level (500 words of average vocabulary), so we “weigh” pages for evaluation (see Helgesen, 1997: 32). Their reading rate as measured in class is rarely higher than 125 wpm. However, they seem to understand that the only way to become strong readers is through reading, reading, and more reading. They expect to score better on TOEIC after this course, and a majority of them expect to improve their vocabulary. They offer a variety of methods to strengthen their reading skills, from watching movies with English subtitles to surfing the Internet, besides reading books on a daily basis. Students agree to read graded readers, but soon they are “stuck” because there are not many books on the 200~300 headwords level. Also, the students’ initial enthusiasm subsides after a few weeks, and some of the students complain that they are tired because they have to concentrate when they read. I explain that this is normal, and that they will get used to it, but I see they are not convinced. Few students realize that the problem might not only be with comprehending English sentences, but with their own habits, or rather their **lack of reading habits**. There are a few who start getting hooked and try to read on

higher levels only to struggle with too many characters in a story or to lose track of who is talking to whom in the dialogue. There are also a few who are strongly motivated and determined to do their best, students who persevere, ask questions, write summaries, and come to my office to borrow more books. They are a minority, but I cherish their enthusiasm, and we have discussions in private mostly about the contents of books they read because of misunderstandings of culturally different situations, behaviors, or ideas. I learn a lot about my students by talking to them about books. Students who rarely voice their opinions in other situations become more open and specific, and they show strong feelings on a variety of issues. Reading is an individual activity, so it is also a very personal activity. To be able to judge the literary value of a book takes a lot of experience, comparative skills, knowledge of literature, taste and other qualities, but anyone can relate to the contents on a background knowledge basis. When the language is understood and the story interesting, naturally a reader is no longer indifferent to what she reads. This is why even with their limited English students are able to respond to a story. In my experience in ER class, I find graded readers useful because students' response is immediate, and students develop a positive attitude toward reading in general.

4. Teacher's role – Preparation and tasks

The main purpose of this course is to read large quantities of reading materials that are within students' linguistic competence and to enjoy reading (see: Day and Bamford, 1998; Waring, 2006)). Students are requested to read outside the classroom as much as possible, yet it is the atmosphere and tasks done in classroom that prompt them to do it. Careful preparation of a lesson by the teacher is a vital factor in teaching/learning process. It is also imperative for students to see their improvement from the activities introduced in ER class. Craven (2009) states: "Students in our classes are there to learn. They are giving their time, effort, and possibly their money, to be there. Understandably, they need to feel that their reading ability is

improving as a result. It may seem obvious, but time spent in a reading class needs to be distinct from time spent reading out of class. Learners need to see clear learning outcomes from their experiences in class.” The following are guidelines I developed and used in my ER class.

- Make carefully planned lessons with clearly defined goals.
- Prepare a range of reading materials.
- Design your own notebooks/portfolios or reading report cards for written summaries, and distribute them to the students (Ss).
- Make sure notebooks/portfolios have special cards for writing down new words with their Japanese and English meanings.
- Insist on explaining new vocabulary in English in Ss’ own words for better memorization.
- Explain in the orientation lesson the differences between intensive and extensive reading.
- Ask Ss what their goals are.
- Be explicit about your expectations for Ss, and set the bottom line for how many graded readers they need to read to get credit.
- Discuss with Ss how many graded readers they probably need to read to see real progress.
- Do not keep talking, but ask for Ss’ suggestions and opinions.
- Make sure the atmosphere in class is relaxed, and Ss can freely choose their reading materials.
- Check the reading report cards (RRCs) and give them back to Ss regularly.
- Teach Ss to count their reading rate.
- Provide exercises for rapid word/number recognition and reading materials for reading in class.
- Help Ss to make the transfer from teacher-centered learning to autonomous learning.

5. Students’ role - Strategies and activities involved

- Read extensively outside class.
- Read some passages in class and discuss the strategies involved.
- Use strategies such as scanning/skimming, activating prior knowledge, repeated reading, and reading for comprehension.
- Do semantic maps and try to elicit as much information as possible from titles, photos and illustrations.
- Choose their own reading materials for library and outside reading activities.
- “Weigh” pages for evaluation.
- Evaluate and summarize books they read in their reading report cards (portfolio).
- Keep a record of their reading rate.
- Participate in discussions about books they liked best.
- Choose freely the language while talking about contents (Japanese or English).
- Discuss students’ own reading strategies.
- Answer questionnaires.

6. Graded readers and Reading Report Cards

My students can choose from 100 graded readers from my private collection in my office and over 1,500 others from the university’s library. On average, students read 2~3 graded readers per week, and enthusiastic students read about 5. Stronger students and adults in my class read at the 400~600 headwords level, occasionally trying higher, but the majority stays at the 200~300 headwords level. Their reading rate increases slightly, though nobody has reached 200w/m yet. Students complain that there are too few lower level books in the library. Still, their comprehension of texts improves, probably because they read for almost four months at the same vocabulary level. A few students try to read at a higher level, but they have problems with too many characters and place names, and they become confused. Some students become discouraged and do not read much. I believe they are able to read more if

they are “pushed” a little. However, they enjoy this class as an experience, and I think that it is a start. But I am also convinced that without strong motivation and patience they are not likely to continue reading after this course ends. I ask students to read more, but I choose not to press them for it because it would not be consistent with what I try to introduce, i.e. individual responsibility for one’s learning.

For the first three years of this course, students were requested to write summaries of the books they read. Two stylistic patterns were found: one was an attempt to *summarize*, the other to *retell* a story. The first was more difficult to achieve due to the editing process necessary to form and convey ideas by linking different parts of a story. In general, students with a higher ability in English tended to summarize, and weaker students tended to retell, but there was no evidence that the better students would not relapse to retelling when they read a more challenging text. While students spent too much time on writing summaries, those who did not enjoy writing tended to read less because they started to choose books for which writing a summary would be easy. Also, because they were not able to tell the story in their own words, students often copied parts of the text. Finally, it was difficult not to check their essays thoroughly, but doing so left them crisscrossed with marks and lines which in turn upset the students, who thought they were not making much progress if their writing was so poor.

This year, the written summaries of the easy books students read were replaced by Reading Report Cards (RRC), which contain sections prompting students to be explicit about the contents while not requiring them to write long essays as was the case with the summaries.

Students write RRCs, hand them in to me and get them back in the next lesson. When I check their cards, I pay less attention to grammar and spelling mistakes than to their comprehension of the contents, and to logical and sequential narration of events. Example ①

below is a summary and Example ② is a RRC. Both have been transcribed exactly as the students wrote them. Now and then, students copy some parts of the text they read, and although I advise them otherwise, I do not press them too much because even this practice is of some value for the memorization of words or chunks of language.

Example ①

<i>Title</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Publisher</i>	<i>Reviewer</i>	<i>Evaluation</i>
<i>Alice in Wonderland</i>	<i>Lewis Carroll</i>	<i>Penguin Readers</i>	<i>Student 1</i>	★★★★★

Review: *On hot summer day, Alice see a White Rabbit and he runs after it. She follows it down a rabbit hole and arrived in Wonderland. She walked in there and met the Caterpillar. He asked the question. He said Who are you? Alice answered "I was Alice. But I change again and again..." The Caterpillar asked "What do you mean?" But Alice didn't answer very well. The Caterpillar laughed and asked again "Who are you?" Alice angry this question. She went to somewhere. Then she met the Cheshire Cat. He guide Alice to meet Mad Hatter & March Hare. Alice went to there. Then they held a tea party. But the party was very strange. So she angry and went to somewhere. Next she went to garden. There were 3 gardeners by the tree. They are making the flowers red. Because the Queen hate white flowers. So, she'll be angry and cut off their heads, maybe. Suddenly, the Queen appeared. Alice appealed for a stupid rule must abolish. The Queen angry what Alice said. The queen went to somewhere. Then, Alice heard "The trial is beginning". She went to the court. The subject was "Who took the Tarts?" Suddenly, Alice is getting bigger in the trial. Then, she opened her eyes. So she awake from a dream.*

My comments: *I love this story. My favorite characters are Mad Hatter & March Hare. Because they are very funny, I think.*

Example ②

READING REPORT CARD

Title	Author	Publisher	I read all • Pages / Vocab.	RT	Student	Evaluation
Alice in Wonderland	Lewis Carroll	Penguin Readers	36 p. /600	25 min	Student 2	★★★★ Great 4 OK 2 Good 3 Boring 1

Who is/are your favorite character(s)? *Alice. She is really honest and cute.*

Interesting behavior or situations: *The Caterpillar often looked at Alice when before it spoke. It is smoking while talk to Alice. That situation is funny and I want to talk to that Caterpillar.*

A character in the book, or behavior that puzzles you: *She really loves her cat but she didn't bring her.*

Personal experiences related to the book: *When I knew this story I was 4 or 5 years old. I have a video and watched to this everyday. I love this characters. That's amazing and funny. I can imagine that world when I read this story.*

Write your feelings/comments about the book. *I watched this story in a movie. I have loved this story since I knew it. I learned from Alice that honesty is important thing in life. This story is one of my favorite because I have never felt to boring while I read this story. Almost story is boring, but not this one. If I see white rabbit, I'll follow it, and also if I have babys, I'll tell them about this amazing story.*

7. Looking for patterns in Ss' summaries and RRCs

The narration in the summaries was not smooth, but the students' efforts were evident in their attempt to provide insight into the most important events in the story. Writing summaries was challenging because the reviewers often tried to say too many things in "one stride." They were not able to construct long sentences while trying to convey the message at the same time. Furthermore, students often used their digital translators while writing, and

ended up copying whole chunks of language and stitching them together without much regard to grammatical rules. Students read faster when they had read the stories in Japanese before or watched movies based on those stories.

The Reading Report Cards (RRC), started this year, seem to be an improvement. Students are able to write short sentences and pay attention to what or who is the subject in each sentence. They are requested to write in their own words, or look up individual words in ordinary dictionaries. In contrast to the summaries, students write longer comments at the end of the RRCs. In the section on personal experiences related to the book and in the comments/feelings section students write how much they enjoy the story, in addition to filling in the “stars” in the evaluation box. Except for a few graded readers, students seem to truly enjoy their reading, and their comments support this belief. They do not simply say that the story is funny or strange but also try to explain why they like or dislike characters/actions in the story.

It is interesting that while there was no visible evidence that stronger students’ writing skill improved, weaker students’ sentences improved in length as well as in consistency in retelling events of the story in a logical way. From my observation, the progress weaker students make seems to be more visible through their summaries, than through the RRC. Weak students were “amazed” that they were able to read on their own. Perhaps for weaker students, who also do not read much in their L1, their acquaintance with easily comprehensible graded readers provided stronger stimuli than for students more accustomed to reading, and as a result produced stronger effects. Therefore, more improvement could be seen in weaker students’ summaries and RRCs than in those of the more advanced students.

8. Conclusion

All students should have access to the benefits which come from reading books, but for the silent and weaker students, reading seems to be even more important for they are not

as active in conversation classes, not outspoken in other English classes, and subsequently have less chance to expand their knowledge of English. The problem is that silent and weak students, despite their wish to become fluent in English, do not enjoy English lessons exactly for the reasons of being weak and silent. Nowadays, EFL education favors speaking activities as being the most direct means of communication. However, not all students are equally apt in speaking activities. Weak students surely conclude they are unable to master English, and they stop making efforts. ER is the way to show students that they can excel in at least one skill, that development of this skill may lead to development of other skills, and that without reading they would deny themselves of probably the most pleasurable way of learning a foreign language. ER should not be implemented as the *only* method, but it should be connected to other subjects taught in English classes and include the vocabulary and grammatical structures which students are learning. The point is to get students “hooked” on reading. Students who become “hooked” do not need much prodding from a teacher: they are on their way to autonomous learning and that is exactly where we want them to be.

Graded readers and other easy materials are not automatically going to create strong readers, but observations done in my ER class show that using graded readers as reading materials for learners with limited reading abilities is plausible as an easily available comprehensible source of input in a foreign language, and it has the potential to appeal directly to students’ sense of accomplishment exactly for the reason of being comprehensible. Writing summaries or filling in Reading Report Cards seems to be a valuable means for output as well as a measure for evaluating reading done outside the classroom.

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