

# Is a One-Year Extensive Reading Class Enough?

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## 1.1 Overview

Extensive reading (hereafter ER) is widely considered to be a good way to improve reading ability, especially in terms of fluency, speed, and ‘reading stamina’ (Yamamoto, 2008). However, it is difficult at times for students to reach the set goal in an ER class, in terms of the total number of words or pages read. In this paper we shall examine the reasons some students fail to reach their reading goal. Firstly, we will review some university ER classes and seek to determine why some learners in the class failed to reach the reading targets set for them by their teacher. Secondly, we will review ER classes in two schools which run multi-year ER programmes. Finally, we will emphasize the value of introducing a multi-year ER programme at Gakushuin.

## 1.2 Extensive reading classes at Gakushuin University

### 1.2.1 A class for intermediate students

An ER class for intermediate (mostly freshmen) students has been offered to undergraduates since 2006. Students taking this class are required to read graded and levelled readers extensively both in and outside the class, and to write a book report on each book. The class also focuses on developing listening and speaking abilities through supplementary, non-ER activities.

### **1.2.2 A bridge to the class for upper students**

ER classes for more advanced students have been offered since 2007. Unfortunately, very few students, upon completing the intermediate ER class, have gone on to take an advanced class, and thus continue their engagement with ER over a two-year period. While this failure to continue may well be due to the piecemeal nature of the university curriculum, other factors, such as timetable clashes, time constraints, a lack of interest in ER, and/or unfamiliarity with the types of classes offered within the foreign-language curriculum, may also have contributed to the low numbers of students continuing to take ER classes. Although it is now technically possible for Gakushuin University students to take an ER class for three straight years or more, the above factors – especially timetable clashes – serve as obstacles, effectively preventing students interested in ER from continuing to take ER classes for more than one year.

### **1.2.3 Difficulty in choosing books**

Students taking an ER class are encouraged to choose English books freely, in what is termed Free Voluntary Reading or FVR (Krashen, 2004). However, some Japanese students find it difficult to choose English books to read by themselves.

There are several reasons these students find it difficult to do so, including unfamiliarity with the concept of free choice, the large number of books, learner preconceptions regarding vocabulary acquisition through reading, a tendency towards overconfidence, and the amount of time available to read English books.

Firstly, Japanese students are not accustomed to choosing English books by themselves because they have not previously been given the chance of choosing English books by themselves at school. They have been provided with the (usually brief) English stories in their set class textbooks, ever since they started to learn English. In many cases they use one textbook in the course of a year,

and read the same story from that textbook together, at the same time, in class.

In an ER class students are allowed to choose from hundreds or even thousands of graded English books. Such a large amount of books is necessary in order to address the wide variety of reading levels and reading interests in a class of students. However, such a great number of books may trouble learners who are not used to being allowed to choose second-language reading material for themselves. Not being able to select titles in the face of so much choice may be one of the reasons some learners fail to keep reading English books.

Secondly, students may want to read English books about their favorite topics, but may not be able to keep reading them because of their inadequate English proficiency. They choose the books because they like the topic, and because the words and structures do not seem difficult at first. However, these students come to recognize that their chosen book is in fact too difficult for them to sustain the effort of reading it. They may not have enough 'reading stamina', which is itself developed only by reading a lot of easy English books (Yamamoto, 2008).

This is one of the reasons why ER libraries need to be well-stocked. A well-known, popular title (e.g. a literary classic, a fairy story, or the biography of a famous person) may appear in multiple versions, at different levels of grading and in different series, from different publishers. If the school has an extensive collection of graded readers, it is more likely that a learner will be able to find a version of that title or story at an appropriate level, rather than at a level that is too difficult (or too easy).

Thirdly, there is the matter of learners' preconceptions. Many students believe an English text should include a significantly large volume of words and phrases new to them, and tend to think that reading easier books is of little value, since they are likely to encounter few or no new items of vocabulary in such texts. It is true that we learn vocabulary through reading, but we acquire this vocabulary through repeated exposure, rather than by infrequent

encounters with unfamiliar lexical items. That is, learners acquire English vocabulary by means of reading a large amount of English, which is different from the 'traditional' method of English instruction in Japan, which relies on short reading passages, heavily laden with new vocabulary. For example, reading passages in authorized high school textbooks for 'English Reading' typically contain 50 or so new words in a story of about 600 words. Most students need to consult a dictionary when reading such a textbook story, and tend to focus more on the new words and phrases than on the content or overall meaning of the story itself.

The fourth underlying reason is the 'pride' exhibited by some learners (Takase, 2010). Such learners believe that they already have a high English ability, and therefore do not need to read easier books, which will mean little to them. Their high level of motivation leads them to take on the challenge of reading more difficult books, with which they subsequently struggle.

The final reason is a lack of time to read. Students face the time-consuming demands of academic studies, homework, club activities, and, depending on their age, cram school or part-time work. But ER requires a lot of time, and learners need to devote themselves to reading large amounts of English ('massive input'). The practice of SSR (Sustained Silent Reading or Self-Selected Reading; Pilgreen, 2000) in an ER class is in part an answer to the problem, but reading English books in class is not enough. Learners need to find time to read ER books outside class, in the intervals between their daily activities. Alas not many students succeed in developing the required time-management skills.

In the first phase of the ER intermediate course at university, the students are recommended to choose levelled readers from such series as the Oxford Reading Tree. Those who read English books only in class do not read enough to improve their reading ability, and so do not manage to progress to a higher reading level. As a result, their degree of motivation decreases, and they

eventually stop reading English books 'extensively'. Those who do not follow the teacher's advice regarding reading levelled readers at first tend to choose more difficult books, which they read slowly, causing them to fail to read English books extensively in the long run. One year may seem a long time, but in the context of a single, weekly class it is too short a period of time for such students to recover from their initial failure and begin to read English books at an appropriate level, starting with simple stories or SSS (Furukawa, 2010), as recommended by their teacher. Two or more years are needed for this type of student.

### **1.3 Multi-year ER classes at other schools**

Although a number of schools have ER classes, most of them have only one-year ER classes or one-shot ER programs. However, there are a small number of schools that have multi-year ER classes. It is at such schools that students are more likely to achieve the goal of a million English words of reading (Sakai, 2002).

Toyota National College of Technology started an ER program in 2002, and its 2004 ER project, which has been continuing for four years (plus two years for some of the students who go on to the two-year advanced course), has seen students make great progress in learning English (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, Fukazawa, 2010). The ER course is set in the Electrical and Electronic Engineering Department, and about 40 students in each class read English books in an ER class for 45 minutes once a week. The students keep reading silently by themselves (Sustained Silent Reading or SSR), starting with simple stories (SSS). They keep a reading log, and teachers provide feedback about their reading performance. The students can read English books at their own pace, silently, both inside and out of class. Some students read while listening to the book's audio recording. The results show that the more English words the students read, the higher TOEIC scores they achieve. Those who read more

than 300,000 words start to show a significant increase in their TOEIC scores. Those who read more than one million words over the four-year duration of the reading program have achieved test scores comparable to students with one year's experience of studying abroad.

Oyu-Gakuen has about 9,000 leveled reader and graded reader titles in its ER library, and students are expected to read a large amount of English in ER classes in the three years of junior high school. The goal here is again more than one million English words. The school has had ER classes since 2004, when it also started devoting itself to the development of English classes. Each ER class has 30 students, who choose English books freely.

A case study of one university student's development of English through ER shows that we need to encourage students to keep reading English books for several years (Kanda, 2008). One year is not enough to guarantee the success of ER. Takase (2010) concurs that we need multi-year ER classes in order for learners to reach one million English words.

#### 1.4 Value of introducing a multi-year ER class at Gakushuin

Gakushuin does not have any coordinated, multi-year ER classes other than a single, small class in the Department of English Language and Culture. ER can have a positive impact on learning at any level, and the earlier a learner

<i>school</i>	<i>class/week</i>	<i>material</i>	<i>grade</i>
Elementary School	1	Leveled readers Graded readers Paperbacks	5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> graders
Junior High School			7 <sup>th</sup> to 9 <sup>th</sup> graders
Senior High School			10 <sup>th</sup> to 11 <sup>th</sup> graders An elective class for 12 <sup>th</sup> graders
University			Freshmen and sophomores Elective classes for juniors & seniors

experiences ER, the greater the impact we can expect. Here is a plan for a multi-year-ER-class in Gakushuin:

(Libraries at each school should have several kinds of levelled readers and graded readers, with at least 1,000 titles in their collection.)

Gakushuin Elementary School has English lessons for 4th, 5th, and 6th graders. The focus of lessons for 4th graders is on spoken English, but 5th and 6th graders are not satisfied with only learning spoken English and formulaic speech. Levelled readers will enable pupils to read English books, just as immigrants in English-speaking countries do.

The school has a number of pupils who have stayed in English speaking countries due to their parents' work and have a fairly good command of English. Such students need to improve their English by reading graded readers and paperbacks similar to those that high school students and university students read.

Gakushuin Boys' Junior High School and Gakushuin Girls' High School do not have ER classes, but their libraries have plenty of English books which students can check out and read freely. Both schools should be encouraged to introduce regular ER classes, in order to increase the reading ability of their students.

Gakushuin Boys' Senior High School has had an elective ER class since 2006. Since 2008 the school has had an ER class for all 11th graders. However, because there is no provision for a multi-year ER class, most of those who have taken an ER class have not continued to read extensively in the following year. The school needs to provide students with an opportunity to keep reading English books extensively for more than one year.

## 1.5 Conclusion

Reading a book is an individual activity, but learning a written language is difficult to learn alone. This year, 2010, is the year of reading in Japan. The government is making efforts to facilitate the people's reading. Schools and

other educational facilities such as libraries are considered key stations where learners can have easy access to books. Like the Morning Reading Movement, which started in one school in Chiba in 1988, and which had been introduced in 24,800 schools in Japan by 2007 (Hayashi, 2007), we hope ER in English classes will spread to schools all over Japan.

Housing levelled readers, graded readers, and suitable paperbacks in the school library is not enough. The schools already have a number of such books, but most students, lacking encouragement, guidance, and classroom opportunities, have had little or no contact with these books. Where ER classes have been introduced, however, numbers of students have started to read large amounts of English.

Nevertheless, merely introducing a stand-alone ER class is not enough. We need to introduce multi-year ER classes at school. In these classes students will start reading suitable material, and will make sufficient progress to see them reach the target of one million English words.

Many students are unaccustomed to choosing suitable books for themselves. They need to have time to develop their own reading habits and tastes through trial and error. Some students do not follow advice about reading easier levelled readers at first, but instead opt for more difficult graded readers, partly because they have pride in their English ability, and partly because they believe they already 'know' the vocabulary in the books they select. In most cases, however, they struggle to read the book of their choice at a moderate speed and, after a certain period of time, give up. They are not aware that they lack sufficient reading stamina, which enables them to keep reading extensively, and which is developed by reading easier books in the initial stages of ER.

Even if students follow the ER teacher's advice and start reading levelled readers first, it will be difficult to reach the goal of one million English words, since they will have to read those books not only in class but also outside the classroom. Given their busy schedules and heavy workloads, students simply

need more time. Grabe (2009) points out that extensive reading requires significant efforts to motivate students in order to be reasonably successful. Instructors and students also need time, to allow slow starters to succeed in turning on their English reading ignition key.

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## 「英語多読授業は一年で十分？」

山本 昭夫

英語多読は、英語を読む力を伸ばすよい方法であり、とくに読みの持久力をつけるには効果的であると考えられる。しかし学習者が多読授業で設定する到達点に届くことは容易ではない。日本人英語学習者は、そもそも英語の本を選書する経験が少ない。また多読をする上で適切な本は普段英語の授業で使用される教科書よりも平易なものであるため、多読用の選書について懐疑的である場合が多い。多読用選書ができるようになるには時間がかかる。さらに、英語多読は授業中のみならず授業外でも行われることが必須であるにもかかわらず、授業中のみが多読で終始する傾向が見られる。これでは英語多読授業の目標地点に到達することが極めて困難になる。本稿は、以上のような英語多読授業の到達目標に届かない理由を分析し、その対策を提案することを目的にする。具体的には、学習院における英語多読の現状を概観したのち、他校の成功例を参考にして、英語多読授業の複数年導入を提案する。