The Significance of Word Count in Long-Term Extensive Reading

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1. Monitoring Extensive Reading

Monitoring or assessing has always been an issue with extensive reading. How can students' progress be assessed? Students in extensive reading classes should be required to read in large quantities (Day & Bamford, 1998). In addition, the teacher needs to monitor as well as verify that students are actually making progress. Therefore, it is very important that students are actually reading large amounts and obtaining input from reading English books in an extensive reading class (Krashen, 2004).

Monitoring extensive reading has two aspects: quality and quantity. When we focus on the quality of students' extensive reading, the teacher might want to know how well students are reading and whether they sufficiently understand the reading materials. Reading comprehension checks, short reactions, or summary writing are used to monitor the quality of reading (Bamford & Day, 2004). On the other hand, the quantity of extensive reading is simply the question of how much students read, as opposed to how well they read. Easy as it may seem, there is no consensus as to what parameters to use when monitoring the quantity of reading. One common way to do this is by keeping track of the number of pages that students read (Waring, 2000; Robb, 2001). Thus, some teachers may give students page requirements for an extensive reading class. Another option is time spent on reading (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009).

Probably the two most frequently used parameters in Japan recently are the number of titles read and the number of words read. The former is quite convenient and easy to grasp. For instance, Nation (2009) recommends that learners read at least one graded reader per week, and an extensive reading program should have students read at least 15-20, preferably, 30 titles in a year (p. 56). The latter parameter, the number of total words read, is gaining popularity because it takes into account the lengths of books more precisely than the number of pages or titles. Also, we can access the information on word counts of graded readers and children's books quite easily nowadays (Furukawa et al., 2010).

In this study, I attempt to compare the two parameters, the number of titles and the number of words, for assessing and monitoring the quantity of extensive reading, using data from students reading extensively over a two-year period. I also employed another parameter, the average word count of the books read, by dividing the number of words read by the number of titles read in certain periods, namely, per semester. The data came from the extensive reading class which I teach. I selected three typical students, limiting the number of participants to a minimum, in order to compare the quantitative data (the quantity of reading) with the qualitative data from the longitudinal case study, to gain a deeper understanding of which parameter best captures how the students are actually reading.

2. The Study

2.1. Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to compare three parameters for assessing and tracking university students' extensive reading: the number of titles read, the number of words read, and average word counts of the books read.

Specifically, the research questions of this study were:

(1) How does the number of titles read reflect the students' two years of

extensive reading?

(2) How does the number of words read reflect the students' two years of extensive reading?

(3) How does the average word count of the books reflect the students' two years of extensive reading?

2.2. Participants

The participants of this study were three male students enrolled in extensive reading classes at a university in Saitama prefecture. They were selected on the basis of their English proficiency (high beginner level), length of extensive reading practice (two years), completion of accurate reading logs, and their contrasting attitudes toward extensive reading. One of the three participants was student K (Brown, Kanda, & Yamamoto 2009), who then continued to read extensively for one more year before graduation.

Building on the results of this previous study, the selection criteria for participants were set with the aim of providing contrasting perspectives. K was relatively motivated and showed notable improvement toward the end of the first semester. The other two students, unlike K, did not seem to improve within the first year of extensive reading, but nevertheless continued to take elective extensive reading classes for two more semesters.

I refer to the three students by using the pseudonymous initials K, H, and Y. All three began extensive reading in a compulsory English class in their second year at university. In the following year, H and Y were enrolled in two semester-long elective extensive reading classes, one in the spring semester, and the other in the fall semester. Meanwhile, K continued to read on his own in the second year.

H and Y were among the lower proficient readers, whereas K was at an average reading level for the university. None of the three students had previous experience living in an English-speaking country. Although K

sometimes tried reading longer materials than the other two students, H and Y, all three students struggled to read Penguin Readers Easystarts, that is, reading materials with a very basic grammar and vocabulary, and a word-length of approximately 900-1,000 words.

2.3 Extensive Reading Class

The extensive reading classes, both in the first and second years, met for 90 minutes once a week. The class time was mostly devoted to sustained silent reading (Pilgreen 2000), during which individual students silently read books of their own choice from the class library. The students were encouraged to read English books that they could follow without the need to constantly use a dictionary, grasping the storyline instead of checking the meanings of individual words (Sakai & Kanda, 2004).

The mobile class library, brought into the classroom on one or two multi-shelf book carts, mainly contained picture books for English-speaking children learning to read (e. g., Oxford Reading Tree, I Can Read Books, Scholastic Readers, Longman Springboard) and graded readers for English learners (e.g., Foundations Reading Library, Penguin Readers, Cambridge English Readers, Macmillan Readers, Oxford Bookworm Library). The university library also had a stock of various reading materials in English, most of which were graded readers of different levels as well as short and easy English leveled readers.

At the first few class sessions, students were provided with very short books with ample illustrations (Takase, 2008, 2009). The aim of these books was twofold: to help students grasp the general meaning of unfamiliar words through an understanding of the story, and to allow them to experience reading fluency in English. Also, the students were told not to make an effort to mentally translate English sentences into Japanese. Instead, they were encouraged to use their imagination, and make a mental picture of what was written in the books.

During the in-class reading time, I conferred with some of the students about

how they were reading and their choice of books. The students in the extensive reading class kept their own reading logs, or "tadoku notebook" (SSS Group, 2009) and wrote down the title and word-count of each book, the date, and a concise reaction.

2.4 Data Collection

The instructor collected all of the data, and analyzed students' reading logs with the dates, titles, word lengths of the books that they had read, and their short reactions in one or two Japanese sentences. Each week the students also updated a running total of the number of titles and words they had read so far. The instructor's observation notes and in-class conferences with the students were also used as data.

The three parameters compared in this case study for assessing extensive reading were the number of titles read, the number of words read, and the average word counts of the books read each semester. The average word counts were calculated by dividing the total number of words read in each semester by the total number of titles read in the same semester. I encouraged the students to occasionally read very short materials even after they started to read longer materials, in order for them to continue experiencing, and enjoying, the flow and easiness of reading in English. Therefore, it should be noted that the average word counts were not accurate reflections of how much students were able to read in one sitting, or the length of books that they were able to read. However, a comparison of average word counts among students turned out to be a good criterion for determining which students were reading more than others, and which were reading less.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The First Semester

During the first semester, there was no discernable difference in terms of the

books the three students were reading. At the first class session, students were provided with one title from the Penguin Readers Easystarts series (200 headwords), with a word count of 900-1,000 words, which they read for 10 minutes. All three students reported difficulty in reading their book in one sitting. When the option was given to them to abandon reading the Easystarts book in favour of other material, they chose shorter reading matter, such as the Oxford Reading Tree series, Stages 1+ to 4. In the first semester, all three students, K, H, and Y, read Oxford Reading Tree books, and K also read other short classic folk tales (e.g. Oxford Classic Tales, Penguin Young Readers). The amount of reading in this initial period was almost the same for H and Y, while K obviously read more than the other two students.

Table 1: Reading Amount During the First Semester

Student	N of books	N of words	Ave. word count per title
K	103	31,470	306
H	145	17,947	124
Y	107	18,336	171

K, H and Y all read more than 100 titles in the first semester of their extensive reading class. The total number of words read was approximately 18,000 for both H and Y, whereas K read more than 31,000 words. K was reading longer texts, when compared with H and Y on the basis of the average word count per title during the first semester. H and Y were at the lower end of the class in terms of total words read.

3.2. Accumulative Number of Books Read

By assessing the total number of books read during the two years of extensive reading, a constant increase is seen among all three participants. It is quite natural and obvious that the accumulative number of titles read increases as the

students continued to read extensively. K had read 238 titles by the end of the first year, and 346 titles by the end of the second year. H had read 181 titles during the first year, and 361 titles in total in two years. Y read less than the other two students, having read 160 titles in the first year, and 252 titles by the end of the second year.
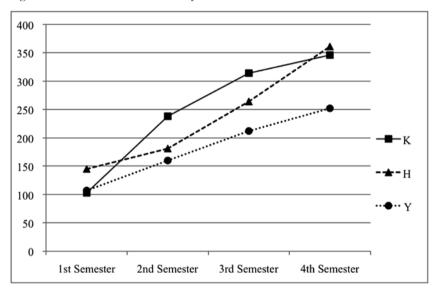
Figure 1: Accumulative Number of Books Read

As Figure 1 indicates, the accumulative total of titles read does not demonstrate the differing trajectories shown by the three participants in terms of reading progress. Because the students read very short and easy materials during the first semester, the number of books read was over 100 for all of them. However, in the second semester, only K finished reading more than 200 titles, while H and Y read far fewer books.
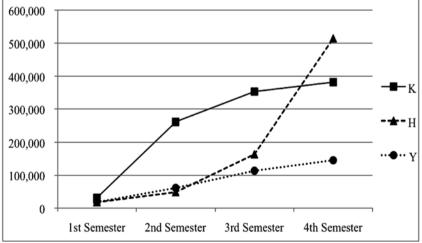
There might be both positive and negative reasons for the decrease in the number of titles read per semester: on the one hand, the students may have

started to read much longer books; but on the other, they may have begun to read less than before. Thus, just by looking at the number of titles read, it is not possible to determine how the students are actually reading.

Further observation and in-class conferences with the students revealed that Y was having considerable trouble in extensive reading throughout the two years. On the other hand, H exhibited notable advances in the second year (third and fourth semesters) and was aware of his own improvement. These contrasts are not reflected by the straight lines in Figure 1, which show a constant increase in the number of titles read from the first semester to the fourth semester.

3.3. Number of Words Read

Based on the reading logs the students kept, the cumulative total number of words read is demonstrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Accumulative Words Read

K's total reading amount increased in the second semester. H and Y read nearly the same numbers of words, 30,569 words and 43,062 words respectively, in the first year. However, H's reading amount dramatically increased in the fourth semester (the second semester in the second year).

These differences in the total words read by the three students were not reflected in the number of titles read, shown in Figure 1. When the number of titles was examined, K read 346 titles, H read 361 titles, and Y read 252 titles. Whereas the first two of these figures, for K and H, are similar, with a difference of only 15 titles, the two students' word totals are quite dissimilar: K completed reading 381,677 words, while H read a total of 514,501 words, 130,000 words more than K.

This notable increase in the total number of words could not have been accomplished solely through a weekly 90-minute's worth of sustained silent reading in class. H in fact started to read outside class on his own in the second year, borrowing English books from the university library and from the instructor. The amount of time spent on extensive reading increased, resulting in the increase in total words read.

The number of words read in each semester is shown in Figure 3. By looking at the reading amount per semester, we can get a clearer picture of how extensively the three students were actually reading.
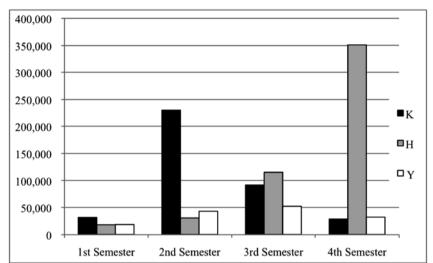
Figure 3: Number of Words Read in Each Semester

The number of words read in each semester corresponds to the instructor's observations. K reported that he became able to read Penguin Readers Easystarts fluently in the second semester, and started to read outside class as well. He set his sights on reading all of the Penguin Readers Easystarts and Level 1 titles, which resulted in the big increase in the number of words read per semester, from 31,470 words in the first semester to 229,950 words in the second semester. K continued extensive reading the next year, but had trouble finding a book series that suited his level of reading proficiency. He said that the books in the university library were either too easy or too difficult for him. Also, because K was reading on his own in the second year, it was hard for him to find time to read.

Like K, H also reported that he noticed an improvement in reading skill. The first time he noticed this was when he completed the Penguin Readers Level 1 book Girl Meets Boy (300 headwords; 1,900 total words) at the last class in the second semester. He recorded in his reading log that he read this title fluently

and enjoyed the story. As his instructor, I also observed with surprise that a student with a lower reading ability, who had trouble reading Penguin Readers Easystarts (900-1,000 total words), had become absorbed in reading books of this length. As H became able to read longer texts, he succeeded in reading an increasing number of words in the second year: 115,014 words in the third semester and 350,971 words in the fourth semester. H's favorite genre was horror stories. In the fourth semester, he read titles such as Seven Stories of Mysteries and Horror by Edgar Allan Poe and Woman in Black (Macmillan Readers Elementary; 1,100 headwords; 12,800 total words).

Y read a similar amount each semester for two years. The total words read per semester exceeded 50,000 words only once. He was never absent from class but did not attempt to read much outside class. Y was occasionally assigned to read "three titles per week outside class" but chose only extremely short reading materials that could be completed in ten minutes or so including the time to fill in the reading log. As the instructor, I did not want to force students to read beyond their reading abilities, since this might foster a dislike for extensive reading, and invite false reports. Therefore, for the reading assignment outside class, I did not set word count goals, and only encouraged students to read three titles of their own choosing, including shorter materials.

The reading amount per semester as indicated by Y's word count was 18,336 in the first semester, 43,062 words in the second semester, 52,032 words in the third semester, and 32,059 words in the fourth semester. Unlike K and H, Y did not report any improvement in his reading skills. Y was probably taking extensive reading class in order to obtain credits for graduation. Also, Y was different from the other two students in that he never expressed any preferences regarding book genres (Kanda, 2009). Although the word total in the first two semesters was higher for Y (61,398 words) than for H (48,516 words), the second year saw a big difference between the two students.

3.4. Average Number of Word Counts of Books Read

As seen in the previous sections, the number of titles by itself did not reflect how the students read. On the other hand, the average word count per title in each semester showed notable differences and changes among the students and also during the course of two years of ER. Figure 3 below gives a similar picture to Figure 3, confirming that as students' reading abilities improve, they start to read longer materials, resulting in a greater numbers of words read per semester.
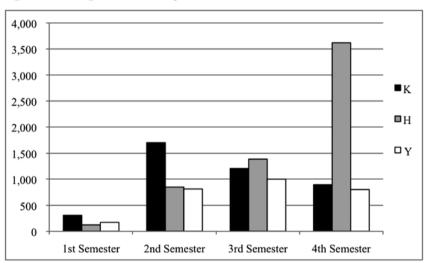
Figure 4: Average Word Count per Title in Each Semester

The differences manifested in the average word count per title in each semester cannot be seen in Figure 1, which shows the total number of titles read.

K saw a notable improvement in his reading skills in the third year (Kanda 2009a), but the second year turned out to be a reading slump for him. The average word count per title was lower in K's second year of extensive reading.

Figure 4 also shows that Y proceeded to read books of a similar length, with an average count of 812 words per title in the second semester, 1,001 words per title in the third year, and 801 words in the fourth year. On the other hand, for H, the average word count per title dramatically increased as he continued extensive reading. H was reading shorter reading materials than the other two students in the first semester (123 words per title) and almost the same as Y in the second semester (849 words per title), whereas in the third semester the average word count per title was 1,386, and in the fourth semester he was reading books with an average length of 3,618 words per title.

4. Conclusion

Three parameters for monitoring or assessing the quantity of EFL extensive reading were examined in this study: The number of titles read, the number of words read, and the average word count of the books read. The qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data from the two-year longitudinal case study on three Japanese university students revealed that the students followed different trajectories in extensive reading: two students showed notable advances, while another student did not show any improvement.

At the onset, all three were struggling to read in English, and there was not much variation in the three parameters in the students' first semester of extensive reading. The number of titles that the three students read increased consistently at the same pace, and this parameter did not reflect ways in which the students were reading differently, that is, who was showing improvement and who was not.

On the other hand, by counting the total number of words read, the difference between struggling and fluent readers became more apparent. Word count also showed when two of the students started to read more fluently and in greater amounts: K in the second semester and H in the third semester, just after they started to read books that they had been unable to read fluently before. Y was

unlike the other two students, in that his reading amount, as manifested in the total number of words read, stayed constant throughout the four semesters.

In addition to the total number of words read, the word counts of the books each student read also reflected how the three students' extensive reading progressed differently. In the first semester of the extensive reading class, all three students were reading very short materials. However, as they continued, two students, K and H, started to read much longer pieces. The average word count of the books K read during his third and fourth semesters dropped following a big increase in the second semester, showing that he was in a reading slump in the second year, when he was reading on his own. The average word count of the books H read increased slightly in the third semester, and then dramatically in the fourth semester. Y, on the other hand, read books of a similar length, short materials only, throughout the two years. Such differences were not manifested in the number of books read. It can be concluded that development in fluency was reflected in the lengths of the books the students read. The average word count of the books, as well as the number of words read, provided helpful information on how well the students were reading.

The pedagogical implications for instructors teaching extensive reading in an EFL setting would be that students' reading can be monitored and assessed more effectively by the total number of words read, rather than the number of titles read. Also, development in fluency is reflected in the lengths of the books.

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「英語多読の長期継続における語数の意義」

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　本研究は、英語多読において、語数が学生の進捗状況や達成度をはかる有効な指針になることを、大学における二年間の縦断的事例研究に基づいて、検証する。研究対象者は多読開始時には英語の読書に苦労していた三名の大学生である。質的・量的分析により三名は異なった進行状況だったことが分かった。二名は顕著な伸びが見られたが、もう一名には何も向上点は無かった。三名の読了冊数は同じペースで伸び続けたが、読了語数を見ると、伸びた学生と伸びなかった学生の差がはっきり示された。語数を見ることで、同時に、二名の学生がより流暢に、より大量に読み始めた時期も特定できた。

　語数に加えて、各学期の一冊当たりの平均語数も検証された。１学期目は、対象の三学生はみな短い本を読んでいたが、多読を継続することで、二名の学生はより長い本を読むようになった。読みの流暢さは学生が読んだ本の長さに反映されていた。一冊当たりの平均語数は、学生がどのように読んでいるかの役立つ情報を示していた。

　教育上の示唆として、学生の読書量は読了語数によってより効果的に評価することができ、また読みの流暢さの伸びも示された。