

“Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis” in EFL Reading —Plant the Seeds for Extensive Reading in Gakushuin—

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This paper introduces the concept of “Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis” and explains the effectiveness of Extensive Reading (ER) when we learn English as a foreign language (EFL). “Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis” encourages the learners’ individual initiative and reinforces their positive attitudes toward learning during lessons. It also implies the importance of the teachers’ role as a designer of language environment. Extensive Reading is thought to be quite an effective approach to mastering English in the EFL context. However, it seems very difficult to bring ER in class because the educational method is totally different from the traditional one, where teachers are to teach English to their students. Basically students in ER are not taught English by teachers but learn English from books by themselves at their own pace. In this paper we will overview the present situation of ER in Gakushuin and plant the seeds for a better environment of ER in Gakushuin.

Key Words: “Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis”, Extensive Reading, EFL without Teaching

1. Introduction

Human beings are basically fond of learning and playing. Children learn a lot of things they need in life through playing since they were born. Playing contains secrets to learning. However, learning at school tends to be very different from playing. Learning English as a foreign language (or EFL) at school is not an exception. Students at school are to be drilled to memorize a lot of words and grammar, and trained to translate from English to Japanese or vice versa. In one sense, these practices are effective ways of learning English, but in the sense of using or mastering English, we need to find another way. Children like playing with sand, which may help us understand a new learning environment where learners can master English gradually and steadily at their own pace.

In this paper, a new concept called “Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis” is introduced and examined in an EFL context. I believe the concept may clarify the characteristics and effects of Extensive Reading (or ER) and help us introduce ER into classes.

2. Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis

2.1. Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis

The practical value of play has been recognized since ancient times. Plato is considered to be the first to mention the importance of play from his prescription in the Laws to distribute apples among boys to help them learn arithmetic, and give real miniature tools to those three-year-olds who were later to become builders (Millar, 1968: 13). Fröbel in the nineteenth century, who opened the first kindergarten in the world, stressed on the importance of play in learning (Millar, 1968: 13). Children can practice the skills while they are playing.

In the kindergarten where my son goes I noticed that kids play with sand without any instruction. Even when they have to do other things, some start playing with sand. Even when they are to dance, march, or run, many kids feel like playing with sand, instead.

The sandbox is the world of creativity for children. They can develop the skills of making dumpling cakes of sand according to their skill levels. No one wins and no one loses. Rather, they sometimes combine their ideas and skills and build something and make holes in the walls. They construct a dam as well. They tend to forget that they are hungry or they have to go home. No parents have told their children to play with sand and they start playing with it without being prompted. The children are eager to play with sand until they are told to stop it.

The definition of Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis is as follows: Learners will open the pages of ER books as naturally as kindergartners play with sand when they go there if they have easily accessible resources and easy to understand and interesting stories. They will be absorbed in reading ER books and it will increase their English abilities.

It can be hypothesized that learners open the pages of English books like kids playing with sand if they have easily accessible resources and easy to understand and interesting stories. We teachers tend to think that learners need to learn grammar and vocabulary first and reading next, or listening and speaking first and reading and writing next. However, any kid can enjoy picture books even though they don't even know their first language.

Burton, Brown, and Fischer (1984) introduce a paradigm called "increasingly complex micro-worlds" when they examine the skills of skiing. In the paradigm, the students are exposed to a sequence of environments (microworlds) in which their tasks become increasingly complex. The purpose of the sequence is to evolve the simplified skills toward the goal skill.

When we apply the paradigm of ER to an EFL context, it may be possible to design a new environment of learning English as a breakthrough in EFL research beyond the input-output paradigm (Yamamoto, 2005).

3. Extensive Reading

Extensive reading is recognized as one of four styles or ways of reading, the other three being skimming, scanning, and intensive reading (Day and Bamford, 1998: 6). Day and Bamford cite some researchers' comments including the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992: 133) and claim that an extensive reading approach aims to get students reading in the second language and liking it (1996: 6). They stress more on the pleasure side of extensive reading than the effectiveness of increasing students' vocabulary and reading abilities just as Krashen, who calls extensive reading *free voluntary reading* (1993). There seem to be some similarities between students' reading extensively and kids' playing with sand and an ER approach might be able to verify the Kids-Play-with-Sand Hypothesis in EFL context.

3.1. The advantage of Extensive Reading

Monbu-kagakusho, or the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) proposed an action plan that was to cultivate "Japanese with English abilities in 2003. The plan requires students to acquire abilities to use English after graduation. ER is close to natural reading compared with other reading activities in class such as translation and reading aloud, which themselves improve language skills. Therefore, it will enable us to learn English to use.

3.2. The problems of authorized reading textbooks

If you take a look at the present textbooks authorized by MEXT, you will find them more content-based and skill-based than grammar-based. The volume of textbooks has been reduced.

Grammar items do not appear systematically. Skills are introduced in each field such as skimming and scanning. Therefore, those who want to know more about grammar have to learn it in other textbooks.

Due to the reduction of the volume, we feel it insufficient. Historically speaking, reading English in class in Japan is not enough. Reading one or two pages a day takes one year to finish reading one textbook. I start using a paperback format and let the students read a story in one lesson just as one would read a paperback. It takes only 15 minutes to read, answer, and check the answers if you use one lesson as a timed-reading material.

Takada (2005) points out some weaknesses of authorized reading textbooks:

- (1) The input is scanty. (800~1,200 words per unit)
- (2) Abstract concepts are described in 800~1,200 words.
- (3) Content tends to be fragmentary and superficial.
- (4) Discourse is not natural in some cases.

(5) Some post-reading activities require knowledge that is beyond what is written in the text.

(6) No variety: most units are expository writing.

There are varieties of classes for improving English. The following two types have been largely discussed; form focus and meaning focus. In order to acquire English to use, learners need to experience the use of English as one of the cognitive activities. Like mastery of sports and skills we need to experience them by our own ways.

3.3. The Role of ER in Language Learning

Day and Bamford (1998: 7–8) list the characteristics of successful extensive reading programs:

1. *Students read as much as possible*, perhaps in and definitely out of the classroom.
2. *A variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available* so as to encourage reading for different reasons and in different ways.
3. *Students select what they want to read* and have the freedom to stop reading material that fails to interest them.
4. *The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding*. These purposes are determined by the nature of the material and the interests of the student.
5. *Reading is its own reward*. There are few or no follow-up exercises after reading.
6. *Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students* in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Dictionaries are rarely used while reading because the constant stopping to look up words makes fluent reading difficult.
7. *Reading is individual and silent*, at the student's own pace, and, outside of the class, done when and where the student chooses.
8. *Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower* as students read books and other material they find easily understandable.
9. *Teachers orient students to the goals of the program, explain the methodology, keep track of what each student reads, and guide students in getting the most out of the program*.
10. *The teacher is a role model of a reader for students* - an active member of the classroom reading community, demonstrating what it means to be a reader and the rewards of being a reader.

Bell (1998) lists up the roles of extensive reading in language learning as follows:

1. It can provide 'comprehensible input'
2. It can enhance learners' general language competence
3. It increases the students' exposure to the language

4. It can increase knowledge of vocabulary
5. It can lead to improvement in writing
6. It can motivate learners to read
7. It can consolidate previously learned language
8. It helps to build confidence with extended texts
9. It encourages the exploitation of textual redundancy
10. It facilitates the development of prediction skills

Extensive Reading can be done at any school. There is some controversy on whether we should or should not introduce letters, but kids enjoy reading picture books even when they do not know the letters. It is better to increase sight vocabulary or receptive vocabulary by reading picture books and listening to those stories.

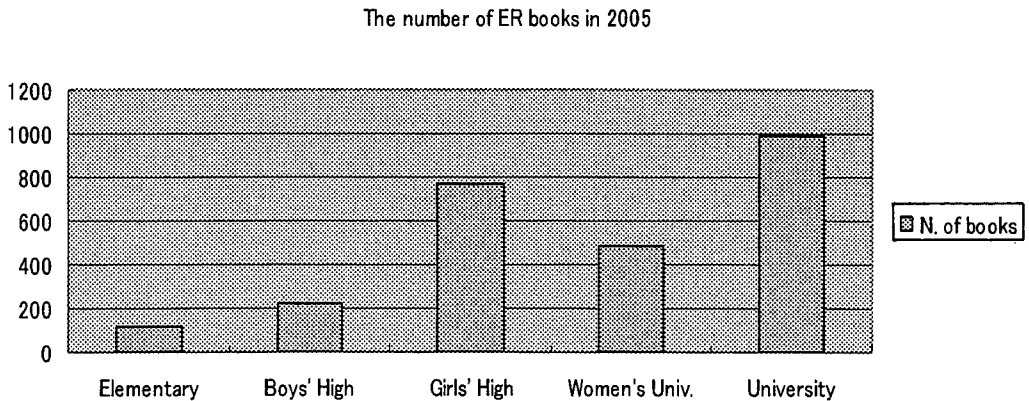
Farrier (1991) believes an extensive reading program in Japan should be done, not only at the college level, but at all levels. Some programs such as reading marathon, Free Voluntary Reading in 10 minutes everyday or every class, Reading to children, Reading to Children Contest should be introduced to each school and university in Gakushuin.

It may also be effective to have Extensive Reading Class as a regular class.

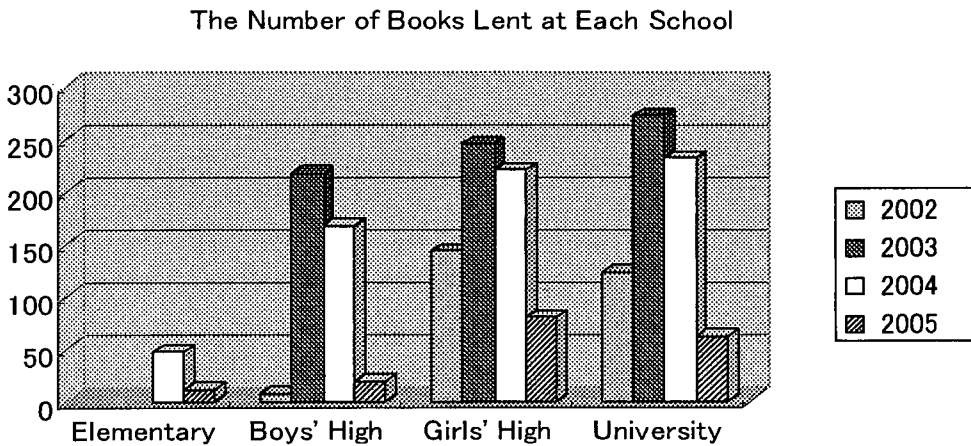
4. Extensive Reading in Gakushuin

Here are the current conditions of ER in Gakushuin. Each school has been increasing ER books year by year. The number of ER books at university was close to 1,000 in 2005 and beyond one thousand in 2006. The elementary school does not have graded readers, but has picture books, paperbacks like Harry Potter, dictionaries, and encyclopedias.

4.1. How many ER books are stocked in each school?



4.2. How Many Graded Readers Have Been Checked out?



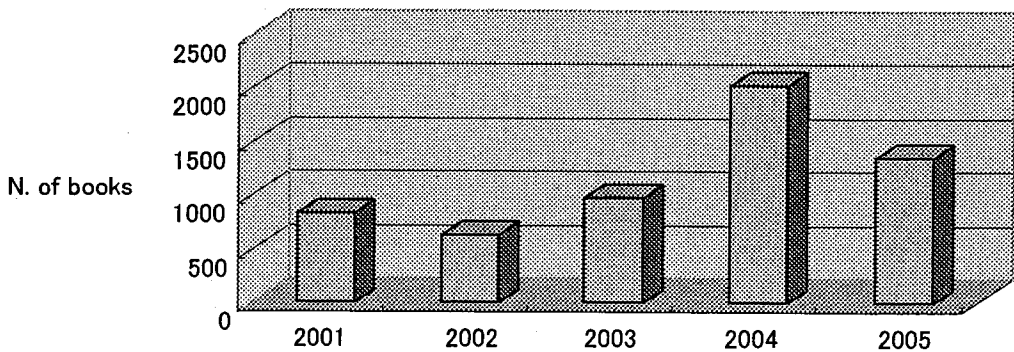
Here is the chart of the number of books students checked out at each school. It does not include the Women's University because the Women's University students lent 5 to 10 times as many books as those in other schools. The number of books in 2004 is exceptional.

In the Elementary School, the teachers read picture books to pupils in class.

In the Girls' High School, they have had a number of projects such as an Internet Project where the students read paperbacks and discussed them with students overseas. Every summer the students are to read an English book as an assignment. Since last year teachers of native speakers read to students in the library once a week. Last year the students in an elective class read two paperbacks and wrote a short essay and discussed the issue with each other including an exchange student, who had a different point of view from the Japanese students.

In the Boys' High School, a book report project started in 2003. The students read graded readers

The Number of Books Lent at Women's Univ.



and made book reports. We also had two projects last year. One is to read graded readers for two weeks. The average number of pages read was about 300.

The Women's University has a tradition of Extensive Reading. The paper on Extensive Reading written by Professor Glenn Farrier is the landmark of the program.

We have had some wonderful projects of Extensive Reading so far, but it is not enough.

We need to do two things. One is to upgrade the Infrastructure for Extensive Reading. The other is to launch new programs of Extensive Reading at each school including the English Summer Seminar sponsored by Kasumikankan.

4.3. Plant the seeds for ER

In order to upgrade the infrastructure, the first thing to do is to buy graded readers. Toyota

ER Programs at Gakushuin

Schools	activities
Elementary School	Picture-book Reading
Girls' High School	Internet Project Summer Reading Reading to Children in the Library Reading literature
Boys' High School	500 pages in two weeks Paperback reading Weekly Book Report (Oral Presentation & PowerPoint)
Women's College	Glenn's Extensive Reading Course ER homework
University	Weekly Book Report (Oral Presentation & PowerPoint)

National College of Technology possesses more than 6,000 ER books at their library, this number of which is much more than the total number of books in all Gakushuin.

The more graded readers at school, the better. However, we have the limitation of budget. Professor Sakai and Ms. Kanda, propose the minimum number of the graded readers' resources at school. According to them, about 700 books are needed. The Girls' school and the University have reached that level in Gakushuin.

The next upgrade needed with the infrastructure is to station the bookshelves of graded readers and paperbacks in the place the students can go and see easily. The Girls' school put the English books near the entrance of the library. Then the students feel the English books are close to them.

Some ER projects will facilitate students to read more. The Intensive Course of Extensive Reading (Reading Marathon) can be held after school and during the summer and winter vacations. Free Voluntary Reading for 10 minutes everyday or every class will be another choice. Reading to Children will help pupils and students become accustomed to reading extensively. Those who read are not necessarily teachers. Students at universities and high schools can also play the role of reading to children at elementary schools and high schools.

5. Conclusion

Extensive Reading has been recognized as a good way of learning English as a foreign language. However, it is difficult to bring it into the curriculum due to its unique shape of education. Learners learn by themselves and teachers are in charge of designing an appropriate environment for learning English. The hypothesis called Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis will be a help to understanding the merits of Extensive Reading in an EFL context.

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This research is supported by the Abe Education and Research Foundation in 2005.

I'd like to express special thanks to the following ten colleagues in Gakushuin: Ms. Ariizumi, Eri (Elementary school), Prof. Glenn R. Farrier (Women's University), Mr. Hamish Forrester (Boys' High School), Ms. Ishigami, Akiko (Women's University), Mr. Nakayama, Koji (Girls' High School), Ms. Shibata, Motoko (University), Ms. Shinohara, Mika (Boys' High School), Ms. Takada, Tomoko (Girls' High School), Ms. Yana, Mariko (Girls' High School), Ms. Yokoyama, Mayumi (Women's University), and Mr. Matsuzaki, William (St. Paul's School, Baltimore in the U.S.A.).