

# “Beach Hypothesis” and Types of Extensive Reading in EFL

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**This paper tries to introduce the concept of “Beach Hypothesis” and to seek a desirable program for extensive reading in English as a foreign language. “Beach Hypothesis” has three propositions of 3Gs (Graded, Guided, and Guarded) and it implies the importance of the language learning environment and the teachers’ role as a designer of the environment, a guide of the course, and an adviser there when the learners need help choosing books.**

**Key Words:** Beach Hypothesis, Extensive reading, 3Gs

## 1. Extensive Reading

Extensive reading (or ER) is said to be one of the most effective ways of learning English in Japan, where English is a foreign language and the students do not have to use English in their daily lives, as Natsume Soseki (1906), who once taught English at Gakushuin, mentioned about 100 years ago. He took the stance of placing value on extensive reading after mastering vocabulary and grammar.

Read as many English books as possible. Skip over some minor parts unfamiliar to you. You will find out the meanings of them if you keep reading to the end. (Natsume Soseki, 1906: translated by Yamamoto, 2004)

ER is more effective in the environment of English as a second language (ESL) than in the environment of English as a foreign language (EFL) because the EFL environment offers the learners much less exposure to English than the ESL environment. ER will play a role of showering English on them. Harold. E. Palmer, one of the most prominent and influential teachers of EFL from Britain and another former Gakushuin instructor, put importance on both intensive and extensive reading:

Reading may be intensive and extensive. In the former case, each sentence is subjected to a careful scrutiny, and the more interesting it may be paraphrased, translated, or learnt by heart. In the latter case book after book will be read through without giving more than a superficial and passing attention to the lexicological units of which it is composed. (Harold. E. Palmer, 1917: 205)

At times read intensively; at others read extensively. At appropriate moments, and for

specific purposes, make the fullest use of all sorts of translation; at other moments, and for other specific purposes, banish translation entirely. (Harold. E. Palmer, 1921: 167)

Reading English extensively will improve our English abilities. ER has long been thought to be a fruitful approach to improve reading ability as mentioned above. However, not many teachers have tried to introduce this approach to their schools. There is no subject like an ER course for English at high school in the Course of Study set by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, or MEXT. There is no textbook authorized by MEXT for ER. As Takada (2005) lists some weaknesses of authorized reading textbooks, all of them have several varieties of topics in them, but not enough. If you use all of them as reading materials in a class, it may be possible to call the activity ER.

There must be many teachers who consider a seasonal vacation as “ER time”. A seasonal vacation is a good period for the students to read a book extensively. In most cases, the students are told to read a book that the teacher recommends. We may call it extensive reading, but it is just a one-shot-program. Some students may want to read more but the majority of the students will tend to think that they are forced to read and will not read more. That means that such a one-shot program will not facilitate their reading extensively.

There are some schools where they have regular ER classes as English lessons, but the number of such schools is quite small. Why do high schools hesitate to introduce ER classes in the English course?

Day and Bamford (1998: 46–48) list the reasons ER is not more common in second language programs: 1. cost, 2. the work required to set up a program, 3. the difficulty of finding time for it in the already crowded curriculum, 4. the different role of the teacher, 5. the “light” nature of the reading material, 6. the dominance of the reading skills approach, especially in ESL academic preparation programs, 7. the belief that reading should be delayed until students can speak and understand the second language, 8. confusion between extensive reading and class readers.

In No. 1, it is said that we need at least 700 different graded readers for a class of forty students. If you have five classes in one grade, we need at least 3,500 books. Suppose one graded reader costs about 500–1,000 yen, we will pay at most four million yen. It seems expensive, but compared with a CALL system, which may cost about ten times as much as ER does, the cost is minute.

In No. 2 and No. 3, we have to do additional effort to set up a new program in a regular curriculum. The present curriculum itself costs the learners and teachers a lot of time and effort.

In No. 4, extensive reading is different from the traditional English classes such as a grammar translation class and skill training class. Yamamoto (2007) modifies the list of “text-based education” defined by Nomura (1989) and lists the characteristics of ER program:

1. Meeting with words and phrases is only one chance of experience every time and it is

- a world of learning without ending.
2. Reader's positive attitude is more important than anything else.
  3. Teachers do not teach basically.
  4. The amount of reading largely depends on the learners' personal abilities and talent.
  5. Concrete examples like stories are shown and learning is done in a concrete situation.
  6. Basically individual learning.
  7. Reading stories, not learning mechanical drills of grammar and vocabulary building
  8. Non-systematic education.
  9. Education without teaching.

(Yamamoto, 2007)

In No. 5, the problem of the reading materials as Day and Bamford (1998: 16–17) propose, is the difficulty level of reading materials should be  $i-1$ . The 'i' means the present foreign language abilities of the learner and '-1' means lowering). You can read a lot if the reading materials are easy enough to read without dictionaries. The problem is how easy should the materials be for ER.

Yamamoto (2003) investigates how many levels the learners have to lower when they can read English passages without difficulty and learns that they can read English passages if they are easier by three or four grades. Yamamoto (2006a) shows how difficult it is for university students to read English passages of high school textbooks. The university students cannot read the passages by 100 words per minute (wpm).

In No. 6, in reading classes, skill training approach has been in fashion for the past twenty years. Skimming and scanning are main skills. It is true that such an approach is important but those skills will not be useful if the learners do not read a lot. People cannot swim well with little experience of swimming even if they learn how to swim well. Those who have practiced long distance running can run a long distance.

In No. 7, the belief of speech primacy hesitates EFL and ESL teachers and learners to start with reading. However, we can understand the story with the pictures in a picture book even if we don't have knowledge of the language used in there. Understanding the content should come first.

In No. 8, the amount of reading in ER classes is totally different from one in classes for class readers. The students in ER classes are expected to read tens of pages a day, while a few pages are read in the latter in many cases.

ER is a meaning-focused activity rather than a form-focused one and it will give the learners of EFL an opportunity to use English by themselves. Generally speaking, Japanese university students seem to have a lot of knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar but cannot use them well. Reading books extensively requires not only the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar in the books but also a good command of using them. If they have little ability to use the English

knowledge well while reading, they cannot read at a proper speed, 100–200 wpm, and they can't read much material. We need more procedural knowledge than declarative knowledge<sup>1</sup> when we read English.

Yamamoto (2006a) finds that the wpm of the Japanese university students reading texts of high school is 57 wpm. If their reading speed is around 50 wpm, it will be quite difficult for them to keep reading extensively. They spend more energy on identifying the meanings of words and phrases and analyzing the structure of the sentences and have difficulty in following the story of the text.

Almost all the university students in Japan have learned English for six years or more and they are supposed to possess thousands of words and phrases as well as a good amount of knowledge of English grammar that even native speakers of English don't know. However, most of them have little experience of reading English extensively. They cannot read fast enough to read extensively. Suppose you ask your students in a normal class at high school or university in Japan if they have read an English book for an hour by their own will, and few students will reply "Yes."

Yamamoto (2006) finds the necessity of such picture books for the university students.

In this paper, a new concept called "Beach Hypothesis" will be introduced and examined in an EFL context. I believe the concept may clarify the characteristics and effects on ER.

## 2. Beach Hypothesis

Reading extensively seems easy because all you need is a paperback and time to read. However, most EFL learners cannot read a paperback by themselves due to lack of English abilities. There must be a proper design of educational environment for them to acquire such abilities. There must be some teachers' roles. Beach Hypothesis may be able to satisfy both needs.

There are some varieties of extensive reading. Yamamoto (2004) overviews the varieties of ER programs. The below table shows the varieties of ER:

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<sup>1</sup>Declarative knowledge is information that consists of consciously known facts, concepts or ideas that can be stored as PROPOSITIONS. For example, an account of the tense system in English can be presented as a set of statements, rules, or facts, i.e., it can be learned as declarative knowledge. This can be contrasted with **procedural knowledge**, that is, knowledge concerning things we know how to do but which are not consciously known, such as "how to ride a bicycle", or "how to speak German". Procedural knowledge is acquired gradually through practice, and underlies the learning of skills. Many aspects of second language learning consist of procedural knowledge rather than declarative knowledge. (Jack C. Richards, John Platt, and Heidi Platt. 1992. Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics. New Edition: p. 97.)

Where	In the classroom or Outside the classroom
Term	Long or Short
Task	Yes or No
Evaluation	Yes or No
Learners	All or Voluntary
Choice of materials	Yes or No

Table 1. (Yamamoto, 2004, modified)

In this paper we focus on the ER program that is held in and outside the classroom in long term (a year or more), with a book report, with an evaluation of the book report, for voluntary learners, who can choose books to read.

### 2.1. Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis

Do you believe that learners start to open the pages of English books by themselves? It is commonly said that young people do not read books. You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink. What if you set a better environment for reading?

In Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis (Yamamoto, 2006), 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.

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. All we have to do is to take children to the sandbox, give them plenty of time, and let them play there.

How about "sandbox" for reading? Put the easiest picture books, which have no words yet, for students so that learners can open the pages and read cover to cover without any help from others.

### 2.2. Limitations of Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis

Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis stresses the importance of learners' will and positive attitudes toward the activity when they learn a foreign language. Learners enjoy reading books as they like. The bookshelves of graded readers are the world of creativity for EFL learners as the sandbox is the world of creativity for children. The EFL learners have a chance to enter a great number of stories with full imagination. They can create tasks to read them according to their purposes and their lifestyles. For example reading a book a day, three books a day, or three books a week. You can choose the genre of books, such as mysteries, non-fictions, and famous classics.

Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis introduces the world of creativity in EFL reading and

recommends extensive reading. However, it does not show how we can learn to read extensively. It does not show the design of curriculum. We need a lot of books in bookshelves in the extensive reading program just as children need the sandbox in their kindergarten. The children know how to play in the sandbox, but we need to tell how the learners use those books in the bookshelves.

The hypothesis also misses the role of the teachers in the class. The teachers are to help the students read graded readers: they are to give advices to the students such as guiding the learners to some book series suitable for them, stopping their reading the materials beyond their levels, and facilitating their reading a lot. It will be better for the learners not to overpressure themselves from the beginning. Haste and waste. It will be more efficient to take the long way round to move safely.

This paper will introduce “Beach Hypothesis” for ER. The hypothesis will complement the explanation of Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis for a better ER program. Beach Hypothesis will focus on the educational design for ER and the teachers’ roles in the program more.

### **2.3. The Definition of Beach Hypothesis**

If the learning environment of extensive reading is constructed by a beach, it will facilitate the learners’ reading extensively. In the beach, there are various types of places to swim in and it is gradually deepening. Some places are dangerous and attractive.

The definition of Beach Hypothesis is as follows: Learners can choose ER books in accordance with their language levels and their tastes and enjoy reading them as people in the beach enjoy swimming if they have easily accessible resources and easy to understand and interesting stories. They are not demanded to read the same book that their teachers choose. They are allowed to read books at their own pace. They are allowed to read picture books that have few words in the beginning. They are recommended to read a lot of books. They will get ready to read picture books that have more words and books that have more and more words with fewer pictures.

It is not how difficult to swim (read) but how much you swim (read) that counts. The longer you swim (read), the more you will become accustomed to swimming (reading) and you can develop your swimming (reading) skills.

### **2.4. Three Gs in the Hypothesis**

The Beach Hypothesis has three propositions that will help the teachers make a design of the ER environment and behave there: Graded, Guided, and Guarded. The three Gs will construct a better ER environment for EFL learners.

#### **2.4.1. The books should be graded**

The books in the bookshelves should be well-graded from few words per page to many, from picture books to non-picture books, from here-and-there topics to abstract ones like a beach (Figure

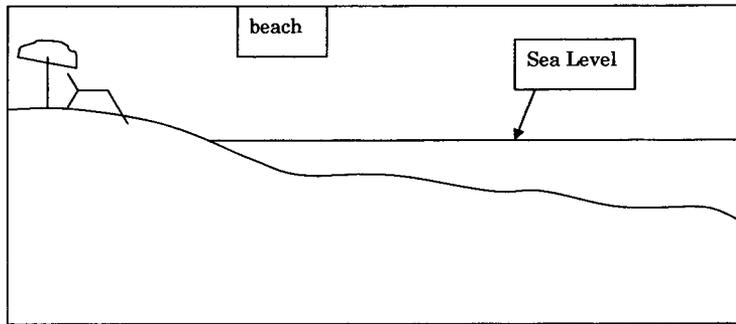


Figure 1.

1). It is gradually deeper and deeper. Readers will read books that are easy enough as swimmers choose shallower places and swim according to their swimming skills.

#### **2.4.2. The learners should be guided**

Some EFL and ESL leading publishers like OUP and CUP publish thousands of titles of graded readers in several categories of the topics and the levels. There are as many choices for the learners as the titles. Some are picture-based ones and some are not. Some have tasks and some don't. Some are rewritten of classics and files, and some are original stories. The role of the teachers will be to guide their students to each series and each level so that the learners can learn what each series is, what will attract them more, and whether it will suit the present English abilities they possess.

#### **2.4.3. The learners should be guarded**

In the beach there are some dangerous spots for swimmers (Figure 2). There might be a steep drop-off. There are some chances of drowning if they accidentally go there. The teachers' role is like a lifeguard here. The roles are to protect their learners from the dangerous zone more than to teach them how to avoid drowning. The learners need to know the dangerous places of swimming. There are many dangers in the bookshelves. Books difficult enough attract readers with a sense of adventure. They tend to believe that they can read it or they have to read difficult books that have lots of new words and phrases they can learn. It is such "industrious" learners that we have to protect. We need to tell them the differences between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge.

Furukawa, Kawade, and Sakai (2003:49) propose that Japanese learners of English, regardless of how high an English ability they possess, should use the easiest graded readers (GR) in the beginning, such as books in the Oxford Reading Tree Series. The Oxford Reading Tree, with nine stages and a variety of components, is the comprehensive reading system of choice in over 14,000 UK

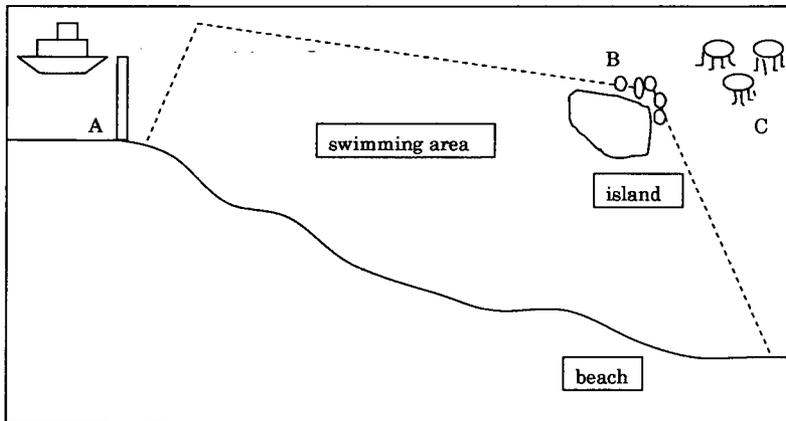


Figure 2.

schools.

If the learners choose a book according to a topic they like, they tend to enter dangerous zones. The contents attract readers, but the level sometimes is beyond their English level.

Figure 2 shows some dangerous areas for swimming. Area A is a port. Area B is full of rocks. Area C is a crowd of jelly fish. Those places turn on a sense of adventure and look attractive but dangerous. If you are a good swimmer, you manage it even if you are in danger. It will be better not to do this from the beginning.

The teachers' role here is to design a desirable language learning environment that facilitates the learner reading English a lot by themselves and give proper suggestions and advices to the learners who are not familiar to reading extensively. They may also have to delay starting reading more difficult books. Basically human beings cannot be satisfied with an unchanged environment with easy tasks.

One more thing to keep in mind: Do not swim for a long time at a time, or you will be drowned or you may be tired and will not like swimming anymore. Too much water drowned the miller. In the beginning, it will be better to read five minutes to ten minutes. If you choose the stage 1 of Oxford Reading Tree, it will take less than a minute to read. If you become accustomed to reading books, you can read for a half an hour or so. If you become more accustomed to reading books, then you can read one hour or more a day. It is the pace that kills. Keeping 100 wpm or more is very important. If you can, you may raise the level of GR books.

## 2.5. Traditional Reading

Figure 3 is the cutaway drawing of a swimming pool. The depth is almost even. The pool is designed to have fewer dangerous points. No waves, no ditches, and no jelly fish. It will be easy for

the swimmers to swim there because the courses are fixed. Let's put it into an EFL context. The textbook is fixed, the pace to read is fixed, and the topics are limited and there is no choice of topics for readers. That will be artificial, monotonous, and, less-natural.

Vacation reading, reading a single graded reader during a vacation, is like swimming in a pool. Students have no choice to choose the book to read. The level of the reader is fairly high and the teachers want the students to read more books during the time, but few of them will try. It is just like taking the students to the deep of the sea and put them into the sea. Some can manage it, but some will not swim anymore.

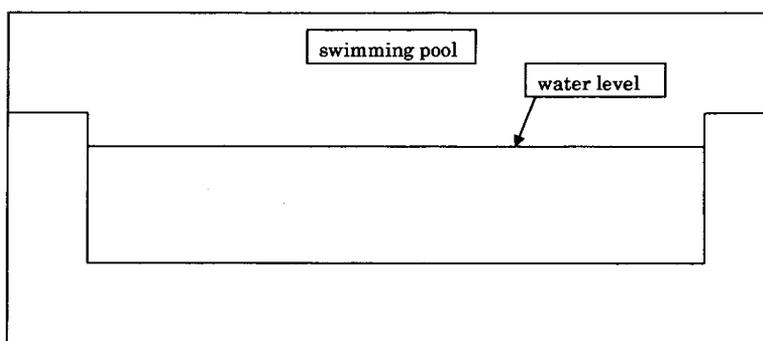


Figure 3.

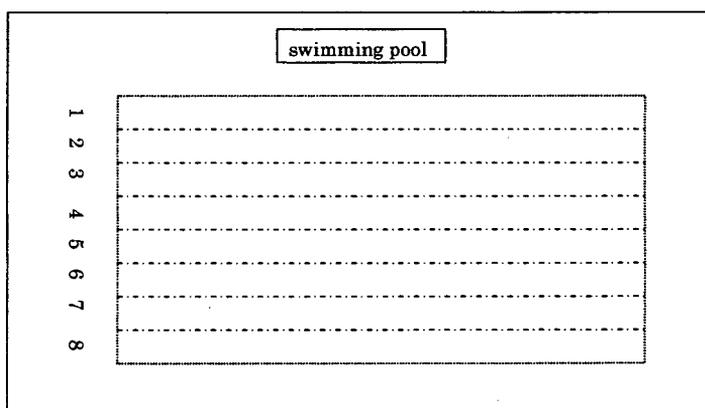


Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows a bird's eye view of the swimming pool. Regular swimming pools are rectangle and have several lanes. The swimmers are to swim along the lanes and not stop on the way. It is safer and less-adventurous.

Swimming context	EFL context
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Swimming pool</u></p> <p>The same lanes Simple scale Almost the same depth Limited directions Basically it is safe</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Traditional English class</u></p> <p>The same textbook The same process and speed Almost the same level of the stories: Limited topics and contents To build up vocabulary and grammar</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Beach</u></p> <p>Various types of land shapes Moderate incline A lot of varieties of difficulties A lot of varieties of attractions It has many dangers</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Extensive Reading Class</u></p> <p>Various types of textbooks that are well-graded  Different contents for different tastes To experience reading Challenging</p>

Table 2.

Of course we can develop our swimming skills in the pool. The traditional ways of reading are also important in the EFL curriculum. This paper tries to introduce alternative ways of reading in EFL and the proper ways of extensive reading. Here is the comparison between a beach and a swimming pool (Table 2).

### 3. Conclusion

Extensive Reading has been recognized as a good way of learning English as a foreign language. 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). However, it is difficult to bring it in the curriculum due to its unique shape of education. Learners learn by themselves and teachers are to take in charge of designing an appropriate environment for learning English.

The Kids-play-with-sand Hypothesis tries to support the EFL program like extensive reading, but it does not show the details of the learning methods. The Beach Hypothesis offers the theoretical guideline to start an extensive reading program that highlight the advantages of the extensive reading program and how to execute it.

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. Beach Hypothesis

encourages such microworlds to the EFL learners.

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