Intensive Reading, Extensive Reading and the English Reader Marathon at Tsurumi University

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Teaching reading in English to ESL students typically involves a choice by the teacher as how to balance intensive and extensive reading methodologies. This paper will review some of the research of these two methodologies and show how Tsurumi University has made a small step to increase extensive reading by means of the annual English Reader Marathon, a graded reader contest introduced in 2011. A call will be made for a greater commitment to extensive reading methodology at Tsurumi University.

Intensive and Extensive Reading Methodologies

Required English reading courses at universities in Japan have historically favored an intensive reading approach. Students in an intensive reading course typically read passages in their textbooks, and the teachers attend to issues of grammar, vocabulary, text organization and meaning that arise from the readings. Reading skills such as inferencing and guessing word meaning from context may be addressed. In some cases, students may be asked to translate sentences or whole paragraphs into Japanese as a means of checking comprehension.
Intensive reading as a methodology is a teacher centered approach, meaning the instructor directs most of what happens in class, including what to read, when to read, and what vocabulary, grammar, text organization or comprehension points are to be discussed. Depending on the teacher, much of the explanation for these points may be done in Japanese. No doubt, students are encouraged to ask questions, but in the absence of such curiosity by students, it is the teacher who sets the pace and chooses which aspects of the text are to receive close scrutiny.

L2 literacy research supports intensive reading as a methodology, particularly as it applies to vocabulary development. Both Chall (1987) and Nation (1993) have long advocated that direct vocabulary instruction is the most efficient means of vocabulary building. Brown (2007) sees intensive reading classes as a place where bottom-up and top-down processing are used interactively to achieve reading comprehension. In other words, attention should be given to phoneme, root and word recognition to progress toward meaning (bottom-up) as well as to the (top-down) process of starting with background knowledge and general meaning and working from there to more specific comprehension. As part of the top-down process, he advocates skills building and fluency exercises, such as identifying the purpose of reading, skimming, scanning, guessing from context, semantic mapping, and genre studies.

While there are proven benefits to an intensive reading methodology, researchers have also cited some negatives. The tendency to focus too much attention on sentence level syntax can turn a nominal “reading” class into a grammar class. There is, of course, nothing wrong with teaching grammar, but it simply isn’t the same as “reading” (Susser, Robb 1990). Nation (2009) questions whether intensive reading teachers are choosing their texts with a view to making subsequent texts more
comprehensible. If the chosen reading passage is full of low-frequency words, then the student will experience little future benefit from the effort put in to comprehend it. The tendency to focus on translation of sentences or passages is another problematic area. One would have to search long and hard for a single literacy specialist who advocates sentence or whole passage translation as an efficient use of time in an EFL reading class. Finally, the intensive investigation of all aspects of a single, short reading passage—usually one that was not chosen by the reader—can make the reading process seem tedious and contribute to the often heard student refrain that reading in English is difficult or boring. Nuttal described the “vicious cycle of the weak reader,” referring to the process of the forced, slow, labored reading of difficult passages, leading to reading avoidance, such that little improvement in comprehension during a course is achieved (Nuttal 1996).

There is an alternate approach to reading, called extensive reading, that is sometimes described as in opposition to intensive reading (Susser, Robb 1990) and sometimes described as complimentary to intensive reading, but used for different purposes (Renandya, Jacobs 2002). In extensive reading, quantity of reading is emphasized, with attention given to student choice over reading material. With students able to choose what they read, they have more control over the level of the reading and hopefully are able to find materials they feel motivated to read. Priority is placed on fluency over accuracy, and on overall comprehension rather than detailed understanding of every word and syntactical structure. Extensive reading is more autonomous than the teacher-centered intensive reading approach, and puts the responsibility on students to monitor their own progress and strive to become life-long L2 readers.

L2 literacy research since the late 1980s has been largely supportive
of the benefits of extensive reading. There is much research claiming that extensive reading programs result in L2 vocabulary acquisition even in the absence of teacher instruction (Pitts, White, Krashen 1989; Day, Omura, Hiramatsu 1991; Dupuy; Krashen 1993; Horst, Cobb, Meara 1998; Waring, Takaki 2003; Waring 2009). Research for extensive reading also claims improved reading comprehension (Mason, Krashen 1997; Lao, Krashen 2000; Bell 2001) increased reading speed (Mason, Krashen 1997; Lao, Krashen 2000; Bell 2001), greater understanding of L2 grammar conventions (Rodrigo, Krashen, Gribbons 2004), improved L2 writing (Mason, Krashen 1997), and higher levels of reading motivation (Elley, Mangubhai 1983; Cho, Krashen 1994; Mason, Krashen 1997; Lao, Krashen 2000). Toyota National College of Technology, by implementing an extensive reading program to “reluctant readers” was able to increase their students’ average TOEIC score from 370 to over 500 (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, Fukada 2009).

Literacy research in the late 20th century led to increased interest in extensive reading and the implementation of extensive reading programs in many schools. In the 21st century, however, there has been a refinement among many reading specialists of the place of extensive reading in second language reading methodology. Some researchers have expressed concern that extensive reading was being touted with too much fervor, and that extraordinary claims about its effectiveness as a means of vocabulary acquisition did not take into account the large amount of time that must be devoted to extensive reading. Renewed attention is being paid to the direct teaching of vocabulary in place of incidental vocabulary acquisition from extensive reading. Hinkel (2006) states, “… a vast body of research has established that explicit teaching represents the most effective and efficient means of vocabulary teaching.” Vocabulary specialist Nation (2001), who generally
champions extensive reading, agrees. Their view is reinforced by CALL specialist Cobb: “What this [research] … shows is the extreme unlikelihood of developing an adequate L2 reading lexicon through reading alone, even in highly favourable circumstances” (Cobb 2007).

As a result of these revisions in thinking about the place of extensive reading in L2 reading methodology, current best practices in EFL teaching now assume a balanced approach of intensive and extensive reading. ESL teaching methodology specialist Harmer states, “To get maximum benefit from their reading, students need to be involved in both extensive and intensive reading” (Harmer 2007). ESL teaching methodology specialist Brown echoes this view, “… an extensive reading component in conjunction with other focused reading instruction is highly warranted” (Brown 2007). Reading specialist Anderson explains:

It is my belief that good readers do more extensive reading than intensive reading. But what makes the reader a good reader is that he/she has developed the strategies and skills through intensive reading that are transferred to extensive reading contexts. These ideas should give us, as reading teachers, cause to pause and consider the ratio of intensive and extensive reading activities we ask our students to engage in and see if we are providing opportunities for both types of reading (Anderson 1999).

The English Reader Marathon at Tsurumi University

On a practical level, teachers who have exclusively favored an intensive reading approach in the past may be at a loss as to how to
implement extensive reading in their classes. They would have to re-think how to spend class time, become familiar with new types of reading material, and struggle, perhaps, to provide adequate amounts and varieties of material to students. There is also the problem of monitoring student performance and achievement.

At Tsurumi University, we have taken a small step towards introducing extensive reading into reading classes while acknowledging the above-stated concerns. In 2011, we began the annual English Reader Marathon, a contest that promotes the reading of graded readers to foster greater quantity of reading.

Graded readers are, of course, not synonymous with extensive reading, but are an often-used subset of the materials available in extensive reading. Graded readers are either simplified versions of previously written works, or original stories specifically created for graded reader libraries. They are categorized into different levels of difficulty based on the complexity of grammar and the number of vocabulary words introduced. Nation touts the merits of graded readers when he says, “Without graded readers, reading for a second language learner would be one continuous struggle against an overwhelming vocabulary level” (Nation 2005). Graded readers feature age-appropriate content, so they are generally viewed as better for young adults than children’s literature, which, while certainly simple enough for second language learners, may be viewed as too childish by university students. Graded readers have the additional advantages of being slim, lightweight, inexpensive, and of being available in great numbers at all proficiency levels. A practical reason for using them at Tsurumi University is that they are supported by the Moodle Reader system, which allows teachers to easily monitor student progress and performance.
The Moodle Reader Module, at moodlereader.org, is a free system available online for teachers to see at a glance how many graded readers a student has read. The system exists thanks to the effort of Thomas Robb of Kyoto Sangyo University and other volunteers who contribute to this mammoth project. Moodle Reader provides short online quizzes for most published graded readers that are available in English. Quizzes can be taken either at school or at home, or wherever a computer with Internet access is available. Passing a quiz with a score of 60% within a duration of 15 minutes is considered evidence that the book was read. Teachers and contest administrators are able to view at a glance how many books, if any, each student has read, as well as quiz scores and which titles and graded reader levels the student attempted.

Tsurumi University began the English Reader Marathon in 2011. First and second year students were informed of the contest in June in seminar classes and reading classes. The contest ran until December 1 of the same year. Students were told that prizes would be awarded to students who read the most graded readers within the contest period. During the time of the contest, some teachers promoted the contest in their classes by assigning the reading of several readers as a homework assignment, and one teacher helped the students in his class to log in to Moodle Reader as part of a class activity.

The results of the 2011 contest were modest, but so were the aims. Out of roughly two hundred first and second year students, 17 students made a serious effort at participating by reading more than 3 graded readers. The winning student, a freshman, read 64, and the second place student, also a freshman, read 54. Fifteen students at third place or lower read an average of 14 graded readers. However, a fair number of students (60) read from 1 to 3 graded readers, due mainly to teachers requiring them in classes to make that minimal effort.
One of the most interesting results of the contest, though not apparent until several months later, was the positive correlation between active contest participation and comparatively high TOEIC scores. The highest TOEIC scores among our 2nd year students in spring of 2012 were achieved by the same students who performed highest in the English Reader Marathon as freshmen in winter of 2011. Of course, correlation does not prove causality, but being able to show that students who read many graded readers also scored high on the TOEIC test may encourage other students to read more in the future.

Feedback taken after the 2011 contest reflects generally positive student attitudes about graded readers. All data below came from 55 students who participated in the 2011 English Reader Marathon by reading 1 or more graded readers and taking the Moodle Reader quizzes.

**How did you feel about reading graded readers?**

(Numbers below represent students; percentages are percent of 55 respondents, with more than one response per student permitted, i.e., percentages do not total 100)

- It was fun. 25 (45%)
- It was interesting. 23 (42%)
- It was useful for English study. 14 (25%)
- It was difficult. 3 (5%)
- It was boring. 2 (4%)
- It was tedious. 1 (2%)
Why did you read some graded readers?
To improve my English. 35 (64%)
___-sensei told us to read graded readers for homework. 18 (33%)
I was inspired by Yamanaka-sensei’s lecture on reading. 6 (11%)
Because of the English Reader Marathon Contest. 4 (7%)

Why did you stop reading graded readers?
I have no time. 29 (53%)
Homework was to read 3. 12 (22%)
It’s too difficult. 6 (11%)
It’s not fun. 5 (9%)
I didn’t stop; I’m still reading them. 3 (5%)
I couldn’t find an interesting book. 3 (5%)
I think it’s not useful for English study. 1 (2%)
I failed a moodlereader quiz. 0 (0%)

To summarize the results above, the majority of students who read 1 or more graded readers claimed in this anonymous feedback that they found the graded readers to be fun and/or interesting. Only a small minority described reading graded readers as difficult, tedious or boring. About 1/3 of the students who read graded readers during the contest period did so because their teachers assigned it as homework. The biggest reason students gave for not continuing to read graded readers was lack of time.

Conclusion and call for a greater commitment to extensive reading

While awareness of graded readers and extensive reading has been increased at Tsurumi University by the introduction of the English
Reader Marathon, it’s clear that more can be done to provide students a better chance at improving their English reading proficiency. The word “extensive” in extensive reading must be taken literally, and the amount of reading that takes place must be increased dramatically. Making extensive reading a systematic part of the curriculum, with continuous support and encouragement from teachers is essential. Harmer states:

Clearly, then, our role [as teachers] is crucial. We need to promote reading and by our own espousal of reading as a valid occupation, persuade students of its benefits. ... Having persuaded our students of the benefits of extensive reading, we can organize reading programmes where we indicate to them how many books we expect them to read over a given period (Harmer 2007).

In the current Tsurumi University curriculum, an extensive reading component should be included in all Reading classes, or for the future, an Extensive Reading course should be created as part of a revised English Department curriculum. Noted literacy specialist Waring went so far as to say:

Bluntly stated, language programs that do not have an extensive reading or graded reading component of massive comprehensible sustained silent individualized language practice will hold back their learners (Waring 2006).

In the event that no such curriculum change is forthcoming, teachers should promote the English Reader Marathon as much as possible, as well as encourage students to read extensively outside of class to further their English learning goals. Students and teachers alike
should also be aware of the resources that currently exist at Tsurumi University that support extensive reading. In addition to the many graded readers available on the first floor of the Tsurumi University library, there are a number of graphic novels, such as *Maus*, *Persepolis*, the *Bone* series, *Barefoot Gen*, and more. Adolescent literature, including many Newbery Medal award winners and honor books, such as *Tuck Everlasting*, *The Giver*, *Hatchet*, as well as popular science fiction (*The City of Ember* series) and fantasy (*The Lightning Thief* series) are available. Popular favorites such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and the *Twilight* series are available as well. They are all located next to the graded readers, and new titles will be added regularly. There is simply no better way for students to improve their overall English proficiency while residing in their native country than by reading extensively in English.

**Comments from Shuntaro Suzuki-sensei’s English Reader Marathon Surveys**

The following selected comments were written by students in Shuntaro Suzuki-sensei’s freshman Reading classes at Tsurumi University regarding the Moodle Reader system of reading graded readers followed by taking online quizzes.

2011

・自分のレベルにあった本だと、気楽に読んで理解することができるのでもっとやっていきたいと思いました。I can choose a book at my own level, so I can read comfortably and understand it, which makes me feel like reading more.

・自分の読んだ本の軌跡がちゃんと出るので、達成感が
あるし、しっかり続けられて良いです。It shows you which books you’ve read so far, so you have a feeling of accomplishment, and you want to keep going.

・レベルが簡単なものから選べるので、簡単なものだとちょっとした空き時間にも読めて、続けやすいプログラムだと思う。I can start by choosing an easy book, so if I have just a little bit of time, I can read, which makes it easy for me to continue with the program.

・Readerの本を沢山読んでいればTOEIC等で文章を読解するのが早くなりそうだなと思いました。私もこれから自分に合った本を探して多くの本を読んでいきたいと思いました。If I read a lot of graded readers, I think my reading speed will improve on the TOEIC and other tests. From now on, I want to find the books that are right for me and read a lot more.

・このプログラムはとてもいいと思います。自分でレベルを決めるし、あまり英語の本ってよまないからこれを機会に力を伸ばしていきたいです。I think this program is really good. You can choose your own level, and though I rarely try to read English books, I want to take this opportunity to improve my ability.

・本を読むだけで勉強になるのでとてもいいと思います。Just reading books is a way to study, so it’s great, I think.

2012

・英語力を高めるのに最適なプログラムだと思いました。とても楽しかったので、また読んでMoodleテストを受けようと思います。I think this is the perfect program for raising my English ability. It was really fun, so I want to read more and take more Moodle quizzes.
・レベル１はとても分かりやすくおもしろいです。次はレベル２、３を読んでみようと思います。英文を読むことに抵抗がなくなってしまいました。Level 1 was easy to understand and interesting. Next I want to try some level 2 or 3 books. My resistance to reading English has disappeared.

・こういう機会がないと、めったに英語の本を読まないので、すごくうれしいと思います。Without this opportunity, I would rarely read English books, so I think it’s really good.

・英語の長文を読むのは大変だが解読できたときの達成感がなんともうれしかった。読むことの大変だけれども、これを繰り返し行うことでより読解力が身につきそう。Reading at length in English is a lot of trouble, but since I was able to understand what I read, I had a feeling of accomplishment, which made me feel good. Reading is difficult, but if I keep it up, I think my reading ability will improve.

・なんかやる気がでて、面白かった。It was fun, so I felt kind of motivated.

・日々英語を読むくせがついてとてもいいと思いました。I got into the habit of reading every day, which is really good, I think.

・毎回思いますのが本当に良いプログラムだと思います。手軽にはじめられるので、またたくさん読みたいと思います。Every time I do it I think how good this program is. It’s easy to get started, so I think I want to read a lot more.
References


Moodle Reader Module, http://www.moodlereader.org/


TOEIC IP test results at Tsurumi University, June 6, 2012.


Waring, R. (2006) Why Extensive Reading should be an indispensable part of all language programs. The Language Teacher, 30(7), 44-47.

Also …

English Reader Marathon Feedback (2011) – excerpts of feedback taken by Kevin Miller at the end of the 2011 school year of first and second year students who participated in the English Reader Marathon by reading one or more graded readers.

English Reader Marathon Survey (2011 & 2012) – excerpts from surveys taken by Shuntaro Suzuki-sensei of students in his freshman Reading classes at Tsurumi University.